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THE SHADOW ON  
THE DOWNS

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*Also by R. C. Woodthorpe*

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THE PUBLIC SCHOOL MURDER  
LONDON IS A FINE TOWN  
A DAGGER IN FLEET STREET  
SILENCE OF A PURPLE SHIRT  
DEATH IN A LITTLE TOWN

# THE SHADOW ON THE DOWNS

*by*

R. C. WOODTHORPE

LONDON

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TO  
H. R. E. W.  
AND  
ROSE

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## CHAPTER I

### THE WRONG MAN DIES

#### I

“MISS PERKS will arrive at five o'clock this afternoon.”

Mr. Herbert Ingram Winstanley, delivering this reminder, rose nervously from his desk and took two paces on the hearthrug. He might have been an elderly and apprehensive colonel informing his subordinates that the enemy was expected to launch a desperate attack upon their positions at seventeen hours.

“Very good, sir.”

“You are sure her bed is thoroughly aired?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I saw to that myself.”

“I am glad of that. It is very dangerous when a bed is not properly aired, especially with elderly people like my aunt.” Mr. Winstanley coughed. “Oh, will you tell Pennington to bring the car round at twenty to three? I just want him to take me up to the Downs and leave me there for an hour. Doctor Prout says I must take advantage of the fine weather to get some fresh air every afternoon.”



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"Very good, sir. I'll tell Pennington."

"Then I think that's all."

"Thank you, sir."

Left to himself, Mr. Winstanley sat down at his desk and read for the third or fourth time a letter written in an old-fashioned, very neat and angular, feminine hand. It ran :

THE PAVEMENT,  
CHESWORTH.

MY DEAR NEPHEW,

Some time ago you said that when I had nothing better to do I might come over and spend a few days with you.

Such an occasion has now arisen, and although I am not sure that you really meant what you said (since people so rarely do), I am taking you at your word, and will arrive to-morrow afternoon at five.

I am as well as usual, but the doctor has said that a change from the relaxing atmosphere of this little town would not be amiss.

Please understand that I do not want to be cosseted in any way and that I shall be able to amuse myself in my own fashion without encroaching unduly upon your no doubt valuable time.

Believe me to remain

Your affectionate aunt,

MATILDA PERKS.

Mr. Winstanley frowned. As a boy he had lived in terror of his sharp-spoken aunt when he was taken on a visit to that strange house of hers . . . though it was a delightful house in the eyes of a small boy: you took four steps up and four steps down to get across the threshold, the bathroom had four doors, and there was a dark, rambling stone passage which gave back the most formidable echoes when you scampered through it . . . and now, at the age of fifty, he was still afraid of her. Miss Perks cared for nobody . . . no, not she . . . and took no trouble to dissemble the fact. She came out in conversation with remarks that ordinary people would take great pains to leave unspoken. She was getting old, but Mr. Winstanley had found no change in her when he had last visited Chesworth two years before; and although her letter hinted at some anxiety for her health it betrayed no sign of any feminine weakness.

Except the omission of a date. Mr. Winstanley frowned again, and corrected the deficiency by making a note on the blue letter paper with his gold-mounted fountain pen. He then folded up his aunt's communication and put it in a large envelope marked *Letters from Relatives: to be filed in due course* which he stowed away in the bottom right-hand drawer of his mahogany desk. After gazing for a few moments at the picture over the mantelpiece, which showed a debonair captain in Marlborough's army . . . Mr. Winstanley's one military

ancestor, from whom he was accustomed to seek, not always successfully, courage in facing the difficulties of an elderly bachelor's life . . . he looked at the clock, observed that exactly thirty minutes had elapsed since the conclusion of lunch, took a dose of medicine from a bottle which stood handy with its attendant glass on an occasional table, sighed, sat down in an extremely comfortable leather armchair, and took up *The Times*.

He was passing off pleasantly into a doze when a knock at the door preceded the entrance of a maidservant with a visiting card. Mr. Winstanley scowled at the name.

"Councillor Speakman. That must be Mrs. Partridge's father. What does he want to see me about? A Helmstone town councillor. I don't want to see any Helmstone town councillors. Why should I see any town councillors at all? Rogues, the whole pack of them."

Helmstone lay by the sea at the foot of the Downs. It was famous by reason of its bracing air, its nearness to London, and its historical connection with the Regency. Mr. Winstanley detested the place and never went there if he could help it. In his eyes the historical glamour had all departed, and left Helmstone a third-rate resort, given over to trippers, comic postcards, sticks of Helmstone rock, and a clutter of automatic machines and amusements devised for people of low intelligence by people whose intelligence was, if possible, lower. Moreover, he

had at this time a personal grievance against Helmstone. He had the strongest possible reasons for abominating the town and all its works. He particularly abominated the Town Council: and from what he had heard of Councillor Speakman, he abominated that member of the Council most of all.

"Why should I admit one of that gang into my house?" he repeated.

The well-trained maid knew better than to answer any of her master's questions.

"Oh, well," grumbled Mr. Winstanley, "I suppose I must see the fellow. After all, he is Mrs. Partridge's father. Show him in."

Councillor Speakman came ponderously into the study and stood for a moment taking everything in with his dull but observant eyes: the fine mahogany furniture, the capacious leather armchairs, the luxurious carpet, the surrounding shelves laden with books, the cushioned window seat, and the delectable view across the front lawn to the humpbacked hills beyond. (Pouches under his eyes, reflected Mr. Winstanley. That meant kidney trouble, didn't it? And the fellow had a double chin. He didn't take care of himself.)

Mr. Winstanley, without offering to shake hands, waved his visitor to a chair. Speakman sat down, and in a moment he was huddled up and breathing heavily.

"Good God!" said Mr. Winstanley. "A heart

attack!" He hesitated between ringing for assistance and going to the door to call for help; and while he stood doing for the moment neither, the victim gasped out, "Don't be alarmed. All right in a moment." Very much relieved, Mr. Winstanley came to his senses, went to a cupboard built in among the bookshelves and disguised by a sham front of books, unlocked it and took out a bottle of brandy. He poured some out and offered Speakman the glass.

"Ah!" murmured Speakman. "That's good stuff. I'm all right now. Sorry if I scared you."

"Do you often have these attacks?"

"Get 'em occasionally. Got to be careful. Been rather overdoing things to-day."

"You take advice, I suppose? But of course you do. My own doctor is Prout: the local man, but very good for a country practitioner. I have great faith in Prout. It's dyspepsia I suffer from myself. You go to a Helmstone man, naturally?"

"Best doctor in Helmstone. That's saying a good deal."

Mr. Winstanley was momentarily in too sympathetic a mood to deny even this palpable overstatement.

"You can't be too careful. That's what Prout tells me. He advises moderate exercise, but for your trouble, of course . . ."

"Possible to take too much," said Speakman, sitting up and preparing to come to the point. "I've

had a heavy day. Committee meeting, tour of inspection, then a luncheon do at your King's Arms here. People tell you councillors have a soft time. Don't you believe it. However, formal business being done with, I thought, as I was here, I would take the opportunity of seeing my daughter and calling on you: so killing two birds with one stone."

"And what can I have the pleasure . . . That is, if you are sure you feel better. Wouldn't you do well to rest for a few minutes before discussing . . . whatever it is you wish to discuss?"

"Very good of you, but feeling right as rain." Speakman had a bluff offhand manner. "These attacks are annoying, but soon over. Your brandy, too: excellent stuff."

"May I . . ."

"No. No more, thanks." Speakman settled himself comfortably in the luxurious chair and sized up his host with unabashed eyes. "Nice place you have here. I suppose you have never thought of disposing of it?"

"The idea has never entered my head." Mr. Winstanley said this emphatically enough, but he was at once moved to correct himself. "Well, that's not strictly accurate. In the unlikely event of the motor track scheme coming to fruition, I might be obliged to change my mind. I refer, of course, to the proposal of the Helmstone Council to sanction a motor-racing track, a sort of rival Brooklands, in the heart of our Downland country."

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"Not a Brooklands," said Speakman, shaking his head. "A road course. As in the Isle of Man."

"But I understand the whole area is to be permanently enclosed by a six-foot fence and used for nothing but motor-racing?"

Speakman nodded.

"Then it's the same thing," said Mr. Winstanley warmly. "A scandalous outrage! I find it difficult to believe that such a scheme can ever be countenanced by people in authority . . . even in Helmstone."

Speakman smiled. "That's what brought me over here this morning. I'm all in favour of it, you know. Some colleagues and I were inspecting the site. It's going through."

"What do you mean?"

"The scheme is going through. The syndicate is getting to work. You will find the track in operation next year."

"Upon my soul . . ." Mr. Winstanley was fuming. He could get no further.

"You're against it?" suggested Speakman, smiling ironically.

"I have always opposed it, and I shall help to fight it tooth and nail."

"Labour in vain."

"Upon my word, it's . . ." Words again failed Mr. Winstanley.

"No good our arguing about it. I can see that.

But look at it calmly, Mr. Winstanley. If you consider it, now is the time to sell your house."

"I can't believe public opinion . . ."

Speakman again smiled ironically, as if he were saying, "My dear sir, we are the people who make public opinion." He leaned forward and, tapping his knee, he announced, "If you think of selling your house, I may be able to find you a purchaser."

"Upon my soul, if the scheme goes through, and we have that hellish racket pouring down from the hills above, no one could live in the house."

"All the more reason to get out while the going is good."

"So it is your scheme?" said Mr. Winstanley suddenly. "I had heard as much." He left his chair, took two or three paces on the hearthrug, and looked up at the portrait of his military ancestor. "I refuse to discuss it. If this is your scheme I want nothing to do with you. Nothing whatever."

He heard Pennington bringing the car round to the front.

"You know, by the way," said Speakman, unruffled, "that the scheme will bring an enormous amount of extra traffic through this village and past your house."

"I know. You need not enlarge upon the details. I have nothing more to say to you."

Mr. Winstanley paused with his finger on the bell.

"Sorry you take it like this," said Speakman, rising slowly. "If you want to sell your house in the next



month or so, let me know. Now I must go and see that daughter of mine. I hope I shall not run into her scamp of a husband."

"I believe he's away."

"Partridge is doing no good to himself or anybody else, and if he fell over a cliff it would be better for everybody concerned," said Speakman: and Mr. Winstanley felt himself in entire agreement. "Well, I shall always be grateful for that brandy."

"Not at all," said Mr. Winstanley, and then thawed. "If you find you're not making progress under your Helmstone doctor, you might do worse than call in Prout. He knows his job, which is more than can be said about many of the younger men. They come out of the schools brimming with theory, and then want to experiment on their wretched patients. You can't be too careful: you should go to a thoroughly experienced man. Now with my dyspepsia . . ."

So chatting almost amicably, Mr. Winstanley showed Councillor Speakman to the front door; but when the councillor, arrived at the doorstep, made the tactical error of returning to the object of his visit, Mr. Winstanley almost pushed him out of the house.

"Bah!" he said to the back of his retreating visitor; and then, catching the eye of Pennington, went back to put on his hat and overcoat, preparatory to being driven up to the threatened hills for his afternoon's exercise.

Mr. Winstanley felt better after half an hour's gentle walking on the Downs. He found himself back near the spot where he had been decanted by Pennington; and, the afternoon being unusually fine, he felt himself justified in resting. He folded his overcoat with great care and used it as a buffer between his rather lean form and the hard ground, as well as a barrier against possible damp in the grass. He passed the next few minutes very pleasantly watching the sheep at graze on the far side of the natural amphitheatre on whose lip he sat: and he must have fallen asleep, for when he heard a shrill whistle close at hand he found his eyes blinking in the sunshine. It was Mrs. Partridge who had awakened him, and she was whistling to her dog. As Mr. Winstanley's eyes grew accustomed to the light, he saw her standing some sixty yards away, turning her head and alternately whistling and using spoken terms of encouragement.

When Mrs. Partridge went out with the intention of exercising her dog, the dog took far less exercise than Mrs. Partridge. She was a strapping woman who bestrode the heights with ease, while her dog was opposed to exercise both constitutionally and on principle. It lagged behind and had continually to be fetched. Generally speaking, Mr. Winstanley liked dogs, but he could not bring himself to feel any-

thing but aversion for the dog that belonged to Mrs. Partridge. Lady was a female retriever, a spoilt, overfed, slobbering, fur-shedding creature of which no one spoke well but its owner. Generally speaking, also, Mr. Winstanley disliked masculine women; but he admired Mrs. Partridge in spite of her tailor-made tweeds and her lengthy stride and her far too accomplished whistling, and he was sorry for her because of her husband.

"This is the sort of day that makes one glad to be alive," shouted Mrs. Partridge from fifty yards; and Mr. Winstanley, rising and removing his hat, reflected that he liked Mrs. Partridge even in spite of her inability to refrain from making remarks as banal as that.

"I love to hear church bells in the distance," continued Mrs. Partridge from ten yards nearer.

Mr. Winstanley had been aware of the church bells since he awoke from his nap, as one can be aware of a familiar sound without paying the slightest attention to it. The Vicar was playing hymn tunes. There was a contraption set up just inside the church porch which permitted a single performer to ring the bells one at a time by pulling little strings towards him, and it was an amiable weakness in the Vicar that he liked to spend a few minutes there in the afternoon, sending the simpler melodies from Hymns Ancient and Modern jingling over the roofs of his parishioners. As a rule the Vicar's efforts irritated Mr. Winstanley, who had an accurate ear: for,

unfortunately, even the best of bells are never perfectly in tune. At such a distance, however, the discords were smoothed out, the staccato effect was mitigated, and no one could say that the result was entirely unpleasing.

"The Vicar is concluding his performance," added Mrs. Partridge at thirty yards' range; and indeed the Vicar was already picking his way through the opening bars of *We love the Place, O God*, with which he was accustomed to bring his afternoon exercise on the bells to a conclusion.

The remaining distance was nothing to the long legs of Mrs. Partridge. Before Mr. Winstanley could reply, she had flung herself on to the turf at his feet and was saying, "Do sit down."

"But you may catch cold. It is very dangerous to sit down after rapid walking. Besides, the grass is sure to be damp. Let me give you my overcoat to sit on."

"Not for me, thanks. The grass on this chalk is as dry as a bone."

Mr. Winstanley, not without some shaking of the head, let her have her own way, and resumed his seat on his carefully folded overcoat: whereupon the dreadful dog Lady, which had been panting with pleasure at the thought of an official rest, immediately came and slobbered over his boots and shed quantities of hair over his trousers. Mrs. Partridge stretched out a playful hand and lightly slapped the ill-conditioned brute. "Down, Lady, down. Naughty dog." Lady promptly sprawled across Mr. Win-

stanley's grey spats . . . which he wore not to be fashionable, but in order to keep his feet warm . . . and Mrs. Partridge turned her attention to the landscape. She put herself into a sitting position and, crossing her hands in her lap, studied the extensive view in detail; and Mr. Winstanley profited by her concentration to deal the ageing retriever a sly but vicious jab with his toe. The dog rose slowly with a hurt expression and removed itself to its mistress's skirts, upon which, as Mr. Winstanley could not help noticing, the addition of a few more adherent hairs would make but little difference.

"Every prospect pleases," observed Mrs. Partridge at length.

Mr. Winstanley, not to be outdone, allowed himself, as he surreptitiously flicked hairs off his trouser legs, to add that only man was vile. Good heavens, he reflected, how vile man could be! Here, in the heart of the quiet Downs, they sat at the edge of the great amphitheatre which Helmstone intended to convert into a motor-racing track. Then, farewell, peace! Round and round the spinning cars would go, their poisonous gases belching to the sullied sky; and the din would be reverberated by the immemorial hills. Mr. Winstanley pictured the vast bowl as it would then appear: he saw the yelling mob, he heard the bellowing of the bookmakers, and he shuddered.

"You're surely not feeling cold, Mr. Winstanley?"

"No, I was thinking . . ." He checked himself

in time. How could he trust himself to say what he thought of the motor track scheme to Councillor Speakman's daughter? He tacked. "The remark that only man is vile reminded me of something. Have you noticed how rapidly Helmstone is spreading up the southern slopes of the Downs . . . and, inevitably, ruining them as it lays hands upon them? Some of the new housing estates must be seen to be believed. Only yesterday I stumbled upon a new outrage: a clutter of bungalows in the most shocking taste, run up on a ridge so that they are visible for miles around. A great notice-board: 'Inspect our Tudor Bungalows!' Tudor bungalows! Upon my soul!"

"I think I know where you mean," said Mrs. Partridge calmly. "My father is building those bungalows."

Mr. Winstanley was not in a position to kick himself. He lunged out instead at Lady, and missed.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I ought not to have said what I did."

"Oh, not at all. I'm afraid I must admit that my father in some ways is a bit of a Philistine. It takes all sorts to make a world." She lazily stroked her dog and continued, "They think a great deal of my father in Helmstone. He's so go-ahead: in favour of everything modern, like this scheme for a motor-racing track up here on the Downs . . ."

Mr. Winstanley bit his tongue.

"It will bring a great many visitors to the town, they hope," proceeded Mrs. Partridge.

"And make our village impossible to live in."

"There are always two sides to every question. My father says it will send up land values enormously in the village."

"Oh, he does, does he?" exclaimed Mr. Winstanley, upon whom a great light had dawned. This Speakman was a greater rogue even than he thought! Here he was, trying to buy Mr. Winstanley's house cheap from a scared owner, and then presumably intending to hold it for the rise in prices. The utter scoundrel!

"You see, much of the traffic from the north will go right through the village."

"It will be confusion worse confounded. The road is little more than a cart track, and Pennington has to negotiate it with the utmost possible care. No doubt they will make the road modern too." Mr. Winstanley shrugged his shoulders.

"My father says the King's Arms will become a gold mine and that there will be an opening for a large garage and possibly for another hotel: as well as tea-rooms and so forth. The village will be a prosperous place when the track is in operation."

"What good will that do anyone in the village, if there is no peace by day and no sleep by night?" demanded Mr. Winstanley warmly.

Mrs. Partridge glanced at him and, being a kind-hearted woman, refrained from canvassing the

subject any further. Mr. Winstanley calmed down and, looking covertly at his neighbour, reflected that so splendid a woman should have been reserved for a better fate. To be tied up to a fellow like Jim Partridge . . . it was dreadful!

"Jim's still away," volunteered Mrs. Partridge abruptly, for her own thoughts had chimed in with the other's private speculations.

Mr. Winstanley could never completely understand Mrs. Partridge's attitude to her husband. Partridge was shiftless, drunken and unfaithful, and she knew it, yet evidently she was still fond of him: she was fond of him, and yet she frankly discussed his delinquencies with everyone she knew. They were apparently a united couple. They took long walks together and she sat with him drinking beer in rustic bars. He disappeared, and she went the round of her acquaintances blackening his character . . . no, no, Mr. Winstanley interrupted himself in his meditations, that could not be done: say rather that she portrayed him precisely as he was. He returned from his orgies of drunkenness or his amorous escapades, and she welcomed him back and seemed just as much attached to him as ever. So the cycle repeated itself, and Mr. Winstanley told himself that upon his soul he did not know what to make of it, he did not know what to make of it at all.

"I think he's gone away somewhere to try to borrow money. He hadn't a penny left the week after he drew his pension, and we're harder up than



ever . . . and that's saying a mouthful, isn't it, Lady?"

"Upon my soul," exclaimed Mr. Winstanley, "I really don't know how on earth you manage to put up with him."

"He gets a job sometimes: you must give him credit for that. He had one as a barman a few weeks ago, but he drank so much they couldn't keep him."

"A barman! And he an ex-officer!"

"One must live."

Mr. Winstanley, disagreeing, so far as this particular case was concerned, opened another topic.

"Your father called to see me this afternoon. He had a . . . he tells me," amended Mr. Winstanley quickly, "he is having some trouble with his heart. He is a heavily built man and will have to go slow, naturally. Now I, fortunately, am able to take a certain amount of exercise. In fact, Prout recommends it. He says my troubles are chiefly due to a sluggish liver. He even suggests that I should take up riding."

The thought of Mr. Winstanley perched upon a horse struck Mrs. Partridge as entertaining: she turned her face away and fondled Lady. Mr. Winstanley was tall and thin: he was fifty and prim and old-maidish and full of an excessive care for himself. He did not strike one as a fit subject for an equestrian portrait.

"Prout is getting old. People say he is getting past his job."

"Prout old?" Mr. Winstanley had cocked an apprehensive ear. "Getting past his job? I suppose he is getting on, now you come to mention it: it hadn't struck me before." He sighed. "My aunt, Miss Perks of Chesworth, is another who appears to be having trouble with her health. Her doctor tells her that the Chesworth air is too relaxing, and I can well believe it. He has ordered her a change, and she is coming to spend a few days with me. She arrives at five o'clock."

"I'm sure that will be nice for both of you," said Mrs. Partridge kindly.

"I hope so." Mr. Winstanley spoke without conviction. "Prout getting old, eh?" The seeds of distrust sown by his neighbour were germinating in the congenial soil of his timorous mind. "Upon my soul, it hadn't struck me before, but I believe you're right. I'm sadly afraid you've undermined my faith in Prout. I have been accustomed to set great store by his advice."

"Oh, it's only what I've heard everybody saying. You mustn't take it too seriously."

Mr. Winstanley showed every indication of taking it too seriously. He sat in silence, brooding over the thought of Dr. Prout's decay. Mrs. Partridge contemplated her own troubles in the intervals of making much, too much, of the deplorable dog Lady, and no more words were exchanged until they heard a car grinding up the steep road in low gear.

"That must be Pennington come to fetch me," said Mr. Winstanley, rising. "It is just as well, perhaps, for I am certain it is not wise to sit here any longer. The afternoon is drawing on. There are clouds about, and we shall both catch chills."

"Come along, Lady," said Mrs. Partridge, scrambling to her feet.

Lady, as usual, refused to budge, and so, as Mr. Winstanley walked towards his car, Mrs. Partridge stayed behind using cajolery.

To Mr. Winstanley's surprise, the Vicar stepped out of the car.

"Ah, Winstanley, good afternoon. Pennington told me you were to be found up here, and I took the liberty of begging for a lift."

The Vicar belonged to the lean-faced type of English clergymen, and might easily have been the model for the well-known advertisements of a somewhat expensive tobacco. Mr. Winstanley was always expecting to see him lean back on the club fender in his study and produce his pouch with conservative encomiums on the merits of the stuff it contained. It was a constant source of surprise to Mr. Winstanley that the Vicar never smoked.

"I'm very glad. You wanted to see me about something?"

The Vicar was somewhat embarrassed.

"It's a . . ." He cleared his throat. "I fear the subject is a little delicate. In fact, to be quite frank, my dear Winstanley, I have to raise a most un-

pleasant matter: but as, unfortunately, it affects you personally, I was sure you would feel that candour was the best course. To come to the point, my dear Winstanley, it's a question of . . ."

"Come along, Lady, old thing, come along," urged a clear voice in the middle distance.

The Vicar looked up and saw the strapping figure of Mrs. Partridge silhouetted against the afternoon sky. He stroked his chin.

"Diana of the Uplands! Though, to be sure, the dog . . . Hardly in the picture, my dear Winstanley. No, I am afraid that somewhat elderly retriever is hardly in the picture. Mrs. Partridge, however, is indubitably well cast as the heroine. A fine figure of a woman! A Diana indeed!"

"You wanted to speak to me about something?" prompted Mr. Winstanley.

"Oh, yes, yes. Yes. Glorious up here to-day. A wonderful prospect, is it not?"

"This is where they are going to make their motor-racing track."

"Dreadful thought. Dreadful. I can well understand the feeling that prompts you to speak in so gloomy a tone. Still, we must fight, Winstanley, we must fight. We must marshal the forces against the Philistines. Indeed they are already marshalled. The lovers of our peaceful Sussex countryside are already up in arms. We have signed petitions. We have written letters to *The Times*."

Mr. Winstanley shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, Vicar, you wanted to speak to me about . . ."

Mrs. Partridge was now approaching, followed reluctantly by her dog; and the Vicar's eye was still upon her.

"Another time, my dear Winstanley, another time."

"I should have thought," said Mr. Winstanley rather testily, "that since you have taken the trouble to come all the way up here . . ."

"Oh, yes, quite: but if you really don't mind, my dear Winstanley . . ."

Mr. Winstanley was infected with a sudden dark suspicion.

"Is it about Prout?"

"About Prout? About our good doctor? No. Why should it be about Prout?"

"They say he's getting old. They say" . . . what was the phrase Mrs. Partridge had used? . . . "they say he's getting past his job."

"Yes, poor Prout's getting on. Like the rest of us. Anno Domini!" The Vicar sighed.

"Then if it's not about Prout . . ."

"The moment is inopportune." The Vicar lowered his voice. "It is essentially a delicate matter and . . . Well, my dear Winstanley," he added with a significant glance in the direction of Mrs. Partridge, "I would much rather await an opportunity of speaking to you alone."

Mr. Winstanley fidgeted in silence. His mind

was filled with disagreeable surmises. Pennington, for instance. Could it be about Pennington?

Pennington had for the last two minutes hovered respectfully in the background. He now tried to attract his master's attention with a discreet little cough. He was far from guessing the place he held in Mr. Winstanley's brooding mind.

"I would much rather speak to you alone!" When the Vicar took one of his male parishioners aside with an opening like that, it was easy to guess what was in the wind. It could only be one thing. It must be Pennington, mused Mr. Winstanley, it cannot be anyone else: Pennington must have been getting some girl into trouble. He would scarcely have thought it of Pennington, a most careful chauffeur who had caused him scarcely a moment's anxiety. Still, one never knew. Better to have it that way round perhaps: better to have his man getting some girl into trouble than to have one of his maids . . . Mr. Winstanley sighed. It was not easy for a bachelor to run a large establishment. Maids had disillusioned Mr. Winstanley before. . . .

Pennington coughed again. Mr. Winstanley came out of his speculations and gazed at his chauffeur severely.

"Yes, Pennington?"

Pennington jumped at the stern tone. "I thought I ought to tell you, sir," he said defensively, "that Miss Perks has arrived."

"What, already? She said she would not be here until five o'clock."

"A neighbour unexpectedly gave her a lift all the way, sir, in his Chrysler."

"I must go down at once."

"Miss Perks said I was to be sure and tell you not to hurry back. She said she had no doubt you would see quite enough of each other in the next few days, sir."

"Really, Pennington," began Mr. Winstanley indignantly. He checked himself at once, recollecting that the chauffeur could not be blamed for repeating messages entrusted to him: he was a worthy fellow . . . Mr. Winstanley had thought so hitherto, anyhow . . . at any rate he was a simple fellow, and surely did not realize how uncouth he had made the words of Miss Perks sound. "I must certainly go down at once. Mrs. Partridge, may I give you a lift back to the village? And you, Vicar?"

"Thank you, Mr. Winstanley. Lady would appreciate it. She says she's growing a little old for rambling about hillsides. Say thank you to Mr. Winstanley, Lady."

"Very good of you, Winstanley, very good indeed, and perhaps afterwards . . ."

The Vicar paused. He lifted his eyebrows. He stared into the valley. The others looked at him in surprise and then stood still in listening attitudes. There were odd sounds coming from the church belfry. One or two notes and then a break and a

fresh start. Someone was experimenting with the apparatus, and this time it was no practised hand.

"Now who can that be? I must have omitted to throw the hand-ringing arrangement out of gear. I blame myself for my carelessness. It is one of the boys up to his tricks, no doubt. Yet they should all be safely in school. Now who can it possibly be?"

3

The unknown ringer warmed to his work and, discarding his first stumbling experiments, achieved some semblance of a tune. The Vicar listened with a frown.

"I am unacquainted with the air," he said on its third repetition. "It appears to consist of some simple variations on the four notes at the lower end of the musical scale."

"I don't know it at all," said Mr. Winstanley, who did not think it a very good tune.

"I seem to have heard it before somewhere," said Mrs. Partridge, searching her memory.

Pennington touched his cap to the Vicar.

"I think, if you will excuse me, sir, I can tell you the name of the tune. It is called 'Show me the way to go home,' sir."

Mrs. Partridge remembered where she had heard it, and bent down to stroke her dog.

"'Show me the way to go home'?" echoed the Vicar. "I must confess to my ignorance of the title.



One of the Dissenters' hymns, no doubt. 'Show me the way to go home!' Indeed, the words smack of the mission hall and the revival tent. Homely stuff with a sentimental appeal to simple souls. Let them be shown the way, so that they may go safely home at last. You may criticize, my dear Winstanley," he added, though Mr. Winstanley had given no indication of doing anything of the sort, "but I feel there is much to be said for the evangelistic method of approach."

Pennington hesitated a few moments and touched his cap again.

"What is it, Pennington?" asked the Vicar.

"I think perhaps I ought to tell you, sir, that it's . . . That is, sir, if you will excuse me, you mustn't think that's a hymn tune, because it isn't. It used to be sung a good deal a few years ago, and the way it goes is:

"Show me the way to go home,  
I'm tired and I want to go to bed:  
I had a little drink an hour ago  
And it's gone right to my . . ."

"Pennington!"

Mr. Winstanley realized that he was shouting at his chauffeur. He blushed.

"A music-hall song, Pennington?" asked the Vicar dubiously.

"I'm afraid it is, sir."

"A music-hall song!"

"I thought perhaps you ought to know, sir."

"Thank you, Pennington. You did quite right to tell me. A common music-hall song. Dreadful. Yet I blame myself. It was remiss of me not to put the mechanism out of gear. Yes, Winstanley, I accuse myself. I feel that the fault is entirely my own. Now, alas, the wardens will insist on keeping the church locked up, a course I have hitherto felt bound to oppose."

The Vicar fell silent and stood with head on one side, peering down into the valley, a pained look on his face. For a full minute no one stirred among the little party on the crest of the hill. It was as if a spell had been wrought by the incongruous notes that rose so strangely from the church below. The unknown ringer picked his way once more through his unseemly chorus, began anew, and stopped in the middle of a bar. There was something in this abrupt cessation of the bells that caused the little group to exchange awed glances. At the same moment a cloud hid the sun. A cold wind made Mr. Winstanley shiver. Mrs. Partridge said suddenly, "Something tells me Jim has come back." Pennington, with his fascinated eyes on the church tower, murmured, "Struck down by Heaven." It was the explanation that occurred to his simple soul. The Vicar glanced at the chauffeur and pulled out his watch. "A quarter past three," he said briskly. As though by common consent, all began to move towards the car.

"If you would be so kind as to drop me at the church, Winstanley," said the Vicar, "I should be most grateful. I feel that this matter should be looked into."

The chauffeur went on ahead, returned and touched his cap.

"What is it now, Pennington?" asked Mr. Winstanley irritably.

"I think I ought to tell you, sir. The near side back tyre is down and I shall have to change the wheel."

Mr. Winstanley tut-tutted, but the delay was not to be helped. The Vicar and Mrs. Partridge, in spite of their respective anxieties, seemed not to mind being kept waiting. They had a great respect for each other. Mrs. Partridge was a staunch adherent of the Church and a regular attendant at early morning services; and the Vicar admired her also for her sturdy figure and for the fortitude with which, in his opinion, she endured her despicable husband. Mr. Winstanley tried to draw the Vicar apart so that he might have the promised private conference and set his mind at rest, but he met with no success in his manoeuvres. The Vicar and Mrs. Partridge had too much to say to each other.

"Ready now, sir," said Pennington, touching his cap.

Mr. Winstanley felt that delicacy required him to take his seat beside his chauffeur. This left the rear places for Mrs. Partridge and the Vicar, and for the dreadful dog Lady; but the Vicar's thoughts had now returned to the outrage upon his cherished bells, and he was in no mind to worry about the quantities of hair that were shed upon the ends of his trousers. Nothing was said during the careful journey down the difficult road.

Pennington pulled up at the lych-gate and turned his head towards the church porch, with a look on his face that told its own story. If presently the blackened corpse of a stricken blasphemer were carried down the gravel path, nobody would be less surprised than Pennington.

The Vicar jumped from the car and hurried into the church. Mrs. Partridge got out too. She paced up and down the strip of pavement outside the churchyard wall, paused to fondle Lady and to assure the animal that everything would be all right, and resumed her pacing. She knew what she expected the Vicar to find.

"We had better wait, Pennington," murmured Mr. Winstanley uncomfortably, "in case we can be of any assistance."

Pennington, who thought the instruction unneces-

sary, touched his cap and continued to gape at the church porch.

The clock on the dashboard marked off two minutes before the Vicar was seen to reappear. He came down the gravel path moving quickly, but without indecorous haste. The expression on his face made Mr. Winstanley cry out at once to ask whether anything was wrong. Mrs. Partridge stood still, her face blanched.

The Vicar reached the gate. Mr. Winstanley noticed that he was carrying his hat in his hand. Mrs. Partridge drew close and wished to say something but feared to utter the words. The Vicar took no notice of her for the moment and spoke to Mr. Winstanley in a low voice.

"Pennington had better fetch Doctor Prout, though I fear it is too late. Winstanley, I must speak to you a moment."

Mr. Winstanley dumbly descended from the car. Pennington, touching his cap, awoke from his concentration and with "I told you so" written on his ruddy face drove away. The dog Lady, which had refused to leave its comfortable seat on the back cushions, went with him.

"Come," said the Vicar, putting his arm in Mr. Winstanley's and drawing him aside.

Mrs. Partridge thrust herself in front of them.

"For God's sake, Vicar," she cried, "you must tell me what has happened. Is it . . . is it worse than I thought?"

## THE WRONG MAN DIES

The clergyman sighed and looked at her sorrowfully. He addressed her instinctively by her Christian name.

"Mary, you must be brave."

"Jim!"

"No, no," she heard him murmur; and she exclaimed, "Then he's not dead? Oh, thank God for that!"

The Vicar bit his lip.

"Mary," he said, very gently, "be calm and listen. I have sad news for you. It is your father. I found him lying inside the porch, and I am very much afraid . . ."

"It's not Jim. He's dead, but it's not Jim. It's my father!"

Mr. Winstanley shuddered as he heard the dreadful sound of a woman's hysterical laughter.

## CHAPTER II

### HOME-MADE WINE

#### I

THE movements of Councillor Speakman on the day of his death formed afterwards a subject of considerable interest to at least one person. In the morning, as he had told Mr. Winstanley, he had attended a committee meeting and then motored out with several of his colleagues to inspect the site of the proposed track. The inspection concluded, he had lunched at the King's Arms and called upon Mr. Winstanley.

After being shown to the door by Mr. Winstanley, he had made his way through the village with the intention of visiting his daughter; but, seeing one of the Helmstone municipal motor-cars still standing outside the King's Arms, he was diverted from his purpose and turned in to the saloon bar.

Three of Speakman's colleagues lingered there over glasses of beer, and the only other customer present was Mr. Partridge, drowsing in a boozy slumber in a comfortable chair under a glass-cased trout. As the door opened Partridge blinked an eyelid, mur-

mured something that could not be understood, and to all appearance fell fast asleep again. Speakman did not at first notice that his reprehensible son-in-law was there. He dropped into an armchair, feeling rather tired, and declined his colleagues' invitations to a drink.

"I should like to have something for the good of the house, but I've got to be careful. Doctor's orders. If you don't mind, landlord, I'll sit down for a few minutes."

"Make yourself at home, sir," said the agreeable person behind the bar.

"That's right," said Councillor Brettell, who, since his wife kept a boarding-house, represented the principal industry of Helmstone. "Always stick to your doctor's orders."

"Ah!" murmured a rosy-faced colleague, Councillor Newcomen, who had recently retired from a profitable career in retail grocery, and who bore a considerable reputation in the town for sagacity, partly because of his distinguished head of white hair, partly from his habit of never uttering more than an occasional syllable in public.

"We can't afford to lose you, especially at this juncture," added Brettell. "I've just been telling our friend here" . . . he indicated Charteris, the landlord . . . "that when we get the track . . . and a great deal of the credit will go to you if we do. . . ."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

Speakman's third colleague also said "Ah!" but



in an intentionally disagreeable manner. He was Councillor Coppleshone, a building contractor in a middling way of business, who had not prospered too well of late, and was given to scowling on the world. He scowled now. No one paid any attention to him, for Speakman was the man of the moment and the others were busy paying court.

"I've just been telling our landlord that he'll soon find his profits soaring. Think of the cars that will be passing your house, landlord. Take my advice and have petrol pumps put in. You'll find 'em pay."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

Charteris rested his elbows on the counter and had the air of giving the proposal his earnest consideration, but he was actually thinking of his wife. There was a worried look in his eyes: he was a naturally cheerful man who had a cross to bear. The cross had declared herself overcome by the exertions attendant on providing lunch for the municipal party, and she was resting upstairs. He made an effort to forget her and give his mind to the matter in hand. "I shall have to think about it, gentlemen," he said.

"Don't think about it," said Brettell. "Do it."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

Two new arrivals stood in the doorway.

"Gracious Powers," exclaimed one of them, "what have we here? Who are these solemn old buffers? We must have tumbled into a synod of

the elders of the parish." He hesitated in mock embarrassment, a smiling young man wearing a blue pull-over tucked into his grey flannel trousers, bare-headed: an incipient beard giving the point of his chin the appearance of wanting a shave.

The other, a somewhat older man in rough tweeds, took rapid stock of the company through a pair of pale blue eyes.

"I believe these are Helmstone councillors," he said, in the tone of an entomologist identifying insects he has found crawling about beneath an upturned stone. "Gentlemen, you are Helmstone councillors?"

"We are," said Speakman, "and I wish you'd shut that door. There's a confounded draught."

"Then, gentlemen," said the second man, "I have pleasure in wishing you good afternoon. Telford, I'll see you later."

"But, hang it all, Montgomery . . ."

Montgomery, active in spite of a premature tendency to stoutness, had disappeared. Telford shrugged his shoulders and closed the door.

"You must forgive my friend, gentlemen," he said, making his way to the counter. "He feels very strongly about things. This motor-racing track you are so keen on sticks in his gizzard. Mine's the usual, Jack."

Charteris drew him a tankard of beer.

"Here's to a happy ending, Jack." He drank, and his eyes roved round the room. "Bless my soul,

Jack," he exclaimed, nodding towards the burly figure nodding untidily in the chair under the stuffed trout, "the wanderer is back in port: Dead to the world, apparently: missing a Heaven-sent chance of sharpening his wits on keen municipal minds."

"You are wrong, Telford," said the notorious Partridge, stirring unexpectedly. "You are ludicrously inaccurate. Your poetic brain has missed the mark again. For the last half-hour I have been drinking everything in. I left myself outside the conversation because it is not my wish to associate with persons of no culture who have already turned their own town into an eyesore and now propose to degrade these noble heights" . . . he pointed vaguely in the direction of the Downs . . . "to their own level. I had hopes of being vouchsafed the ear of my father-in-law in private speech, but the moment appears to be inopportune. I will therefore take my leave of a company which can have no attractions for an individual who, whatever faults may be laid to his account, cannot in justice be accused of lacking the elements of refinement and education."

Having said all this in a voice that was somewhat thick, but spoke with tolerable accuracy, Partridge crammed a battered black felt hat on to his large head and walked unsteadily out.

"He has been drinking everything in," murmured Telford, "and really it is remarkable how well he carries it."

"Who was that fellow?" growled Copplestone.

"I regret to say that was my son-in-law," admitted Speakman.

"I think I've seen him before somewhere."

Telford smiled genially at the insulted councillors and carried his tankard across the room. Taking the chair that Partridge had vacated, he drew out of his trouser pocket a crumpled note-book and a stump of pencil. For the next few minutes he was alternately engaged in making additions to a sonnet in the rough and in drawing impudent little sketches of the Helmstone councillors.

Meanwhile Partridge moved heavily down the village street. He was entirely wrapped up in his own thoughts or he would have noticed how closely his staggering gait was observed by a little old lady in black: a little old lady with a great hooked nose, a dark growth of hair on her upper lip, and remarkably fierce eyes.

"I am not surprised that men should get drunk in these quiet villages," Miss Perks was saying to herself. "There is very little else to do."

## 2

Councillor Copplestone set down his glass of Bass and cleared his throat. No words followed. His face stiffened into its habitual scowl. After reflection he took up his glass again and slowly drained the contents.

"What I want to know is," he said abruptly, leaning forward and looking disagreeably round, "why Councillor Speakman is so keen on this racing track."

Brettell coughed deprecatingly.

Speakman stared at an advertisement of Johnnie Walker on the wall behind the counter. He took no notice of Copplestone's remark.

"Why, he is acting in the public interest. Of course." Brettell leapt to Speakman's defence. "When there is a chance of adding to the amenities of Helmstone you will always find Councillor Speakman in the forefront."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Copplestone nastily. "He's acting in the public interest, eh?"

Brettell resented the sneering tone. "I should say he would be a mischief-maker of the worst kind who suggested anything to the contrary," he observed with some warmth.

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

"Thank you." There was bitterness in Copplestone's voice. "I am much obliged. Since that is so, I have nothing more to say on the subject. I shall not mention it again."

"Do you think it quite proper, Councillor Copplestone," inquired Brettell icily, "for a man in your position to indulge in what I can only refer to as veiled innuendoes?"

"Call 'em what you like," returned Copplestone sulkily. "You say what you like about veiled innuendoes or whatever you say they are, and I go

on thinking about what, if I were put to it, I might choose to call scandalous ramps."

"Councillor Coppelstone is a good judge of scandalous ramps."

"Mr. Coppelstone, Mr. Speakman . . ." Brettell half rose in his chair, thinking not unnaturally that he was in the Council Chamber. "Gentlemen, gentlemen . . ."

"It doesn't matter a rap to me what Councillor Coppelstone says about me," said Speakman.

"But it matters a good deal about the dignity of this Council in the public eye."

"Sit down, Brettell. You're looking foolish. We're not in the Council Chamber now."

Telford dropped his note-book and followed the scene with amused interest.

"Come, come, Coppelstone," urged Brettell. "Remember you are a Councillor. You may say something you will be sorry for."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

"Very well," said Coppelstone. "I'll say nothing more. Wild horses would not make me mention the word contracts."

"What are you getting at now?" demanded Speakman in a hostile tone.

"I shan't say another word," declared Coppelstone. "I've finished."

"I think I'm entitled to an explanation. You mentioned the word contracts."

"What if I did?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" pleaded Brettell.

Speakman shrugged his shoulders. "We all know the proverb about sour grapes," he said in an aside addressed to Johnnie Walker. "Some people may well talk about dirty work."

"Who said anything about dirty work?" Copplestone turned towards the others triumphantly. "It seems that the cap fits. He's wearing it."

Speakman ignored the interruption. "Dirty work comes natural to some people. It's in their blood, and so they're just a bit too ready to insinuate that other people are like themselves . . . not above a bit of graft when there's not too much risk attached to it."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!"

"If you and I were younger," said Copplestone furiously, "I'd have you outside for that. I'd teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head. If it comes to that," he added, bouncing up from his chair and assuming a pugilistic attitude, "I'm not so old but . . ."

"Go on, Sal, I'll hold your bonnet." The interjection came from Telford, who leaned back in delighted expectation of seeing a scrap between these ill-conditioned elderly men. He was disappointed. Brettell, assisted with surprising vigour by Newcomen, pulled Copplestone back into his seat.

Charteris, behind the counter, looking rather like a dispensing chemist at work, put down the bottles with which he had been engaged, yawned, and

blinked through his gold-rimmed spectacles at the clock.

"If you wish to order anything else, gentlemen," he said quietly, "please give your orders now."

"Now, gentlemen," said Brettell eagerly, "what will you have? What we all want is a drink."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

"This round is on me, gentlemen. Name your poisons."

"A Bass for me," growled Copplestone, with the air of one making a reluctant apology.

"Sorry I can't join you," said Speakman. "Doctor's orders must be attended to. The doctor has also warned me against giving way to excitement. Otherwise I might have said things just now I should have been sorry for afterwards. Let's forget it."

"Quite," said Brettell. "This sort of thing doesn't do the Helmstone Council any good. There's been too much of it lately."

"Ah!" said Newcomen.

"Oh, well, it's only human nature after all," said Speakman, in tolerant mood. "It's only human nature to have suspicions at times, even when there's no shadow of excuse for it. Copplestone, I think if you and I had a little talk some day, perhaps tomorrow, we might . . ."

Copplestone caught a suspicion of a wink. "Maybe I was a bit hasty," he muttered.

"That's the spirit," said Brettell.

"All's well that ends well," remarked Speakman.



"Allow me to order these drinks, even if I don't join you. You be quiet, Brettell: I'm paying for these. Three Basses, I think. Care to have one, landlord?"

"Thank you, sir," answered Charteris, who kept a glass of beer under the counter for such occasions.

"Good luck to your petrol pumps, landlord!" said Brettell.

Telford strolled over to the counter. "Give me another tankard, Jack. Unless your new cocktail is ripe for public consumption. I see you've been experimenting again."

"Still in the experimental stage," said Charteris, drawing beer. "I'm not so sure about those petrol pumps, gentlemen."

"You'd be foolish not to instal them, landlord. Don't miss the profits you will make when we get the track."

"Oh, I don't know," said Charteris with his quiet good-humoured smile. "All I want is a peaceful life."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear" . . . the company turned their heads as querulous feminine accents floated through from the back premises . . . "I feel so ill, Jack! I never felt so tired in my life. I don't know what's the matter with me. I never used to feel so tired after a bit of extra work, but now the least little thing seems to make me ill. I don't know what's the matter with me, Jack, I really don't, and nobody else seems to care."

Charteris sighed, but answered pleasantly enough.

"You want a tonic, Doris. Sit down and rest, and I'll bring you along a drink in a moment that'll soon put you right."

He poured one out.

Speakman felt suddenly tired.

"I'll change my mind and have a whisky, I think. A whisky can't do me any harm."

"Splendid," said Brettell. "A double Scotch, landlord."

"Yes, I think I'll risk it," added Speakman.

"Jack!"

In response to the urgent call Charteris set down the whisky on the counter and hurried into his parlour.

"Family troubles," murmured Brettell. "We all have them. Here's your whisky, Mr. Speakman."

"Best of luck," murmured Speakman. He put down his glass. "Talking of family troubles . . . Oh, well, I'd better not say what I was going to say. Who's for a little fresh air?"

His three colleagues, comparing notes, decided that they must return to Helmstone at once. Outside they climbed into the waiting municipal car. Speakman wished them good-bye and made his way slowly to the other end of the village, pausing when he arrived at Mrs. Waddell's garden gate.

## 3

Mrs. Waddell took in lodgers. She was ready to accept guests of all degrees, from working men who shared the kitchen to invalid ladies who entrenched themselves in their own suite of rooms on the first floor. On retiring from her post as cook in a big house, she had prudently married the son of the village butcher. By this strategic stroke she was enabled to get the best meat at the lowest prices: and she had an economical hand with scraps, serving them up in so many and varied disguises that her more alert boarders had plenty of opportunities to exercise their detective faculties. She made a harvest of hay in the proper season and put money by as well as providing for lean times like the present, when her only boarders were the impecunious Partridges and a morose little man named Lovett, who had recently lost his job and was known to be in deep waters too.

Like others of her calling, Mrs. Waddell could rattle away with her tongue, and she was never at a loss for an anecdote, Rabelaisian or merely slightly improper, according to her judgment of the company she found herself in. On this afternoon she was baking a cake, and her face glowed with the heat of her cooking-range. It was a drawback to her house that the only route to the first floor passed through the kitchen. Lovett, who had just come downstairs from his room, stood restlessly at the open door

giving on to the strictly utilitarian garden, shifting from foot to foot, brooding, and obviously desperately anxious to get away, but impeded by the flow of Mrs. Waddell's conversation.

"So I said to Waddell, if these Society ladies we hear so much about do their exercises when they get up in the morning, to keep them beautiful, why shouldn't I do the same, because I would be the last to deny that a bit of slimming would do me no harm. This was just as we were getting into bed, and he just said, 'Get along with your nonsense,' and laughed. So I said, 'It's all very well to laugh, and now I'll show you,' and I stood up in my nightdress and cocked up one leg, just like the Society ladies were doing in the picture in the paper, and the nightdress was a bit on the tight side, and wallop! down I slipped on my b.t.m. on the polished floor, which I keep polished just like I do your bedroom, and there I lay, flat on my back, with my nightdress split right up the seam, kicking my legs in the air, and Waddell lying in bed and laughing fit to burst himself. So I said to him, 'Well, aren't you going to help me up?' and he said, 'Not me I'm not,' and . . . Oh, good afternoon, sir."

At the change in her tone Lovett turned and saw Councillor Speakman darkening the door. He started back: then muttered something under his breath and, with head lowered, brushed his way past. Speakman watched the little man hurrying, almost running, down the garden path.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Waddell," he said, giving his attention to the landlady. "My daughter at home?"

"Mrs. Partridge has taken her dog for a run, sir, or should I say a walk, for I'm afraid its running days are over. I expect she'll be in to tea."

"Very well, I must call back later, Mrs. Waddell." He hesitated a moment, and added, "How long have you had that fellow Lovett staying here?"

"Just over a month, sir."

"Has he told you he's an undischarged bankrupt?"

"I knew that, sir." Mrs. Waddell smiled knowingly. "He pays his week in advance."

"A very good plan too. Keep him to it."

"He's a queer little man, is Mr. Lovett, sir. A great student of herbs. He's one of those people who believe in herbs, and will tell you they'll cure anything, and I don't doubt he's right, provided you know which ones to take for which complaint, as I might say. He goes off every morning collecting plants . . . weeds they look like mostly, which you and me would see growing in the hedges and never think to be full of properties, like he says they are . . ."

"Doesn't he do any work?"

"He's just lost his job as dispenser to Doctor Prout, unfortunately, which I think the doctor only gave him out of charity, and was glad to get rid of him as soon as he could. You see, sir, Lovett is one

of the most forgetful men there ever was, and, if you ask me, it's lucky Doctor Prout parted with him before he gave one of the patients arsenic in mistake for headache powder."

"What does he do with these plants he brings back?"

"Boils them down, sir, to make his medicines. There's an old shed at the back of the garden we let him use, Waddell and I, and there he potters about to his heart's content, brewing all sorts of smelly mixtures. You really ought to see his room, sir: it's crammed with bottles of all shapes and sizes, stuff he's brewed from his precious herbs."

"I shouldn't trust his medicines."

"No more do I, sir, and though he presses a bottle on me now and then, when I get a cold for instance, or when Waddell has a touch of his lumbago, I don't do no more with them than just pour a dose down the sink three times a day after meals. Though, to do Lovett justice, he's ever so clever at flavouring his mixtures so that they taste as nice as you could wish for, though I never do more than try a sip: more I dare not do. Take them regular? I wouldn't trust myself. I've got one or two of his bottles on my dresser now."

"I don't want to see them. Is he making no effort to find another job?"

"That I couldn't say, sir, but he's been busy writing letters all the afternoon. He went out and posted one an hour ago, and then he went to the post

again with two others, which I suppose he'd forgotten in his forgetfulness. There hasn't been any brewing to-day."

"Oh, well . . ." Speakman looked at his watch.

"And talking about brewing, sir," continued Mrs. Waddell hospitably, "I've just bottled off some of my home-made dandelion wine. It's very good, though I say it as shouldn't, and if you'd care to try a drop . . ."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Waddell, I really mustn't."

"Do, sir. It's good for you."

"Doctor's orders," said Speakman solemnly. "I've got to go easy with alcohol, and, between you and me, I've already had a glass of whisky."

"This doesn't count as alcohol," urged Mrs. Waddell. "I should call it more a medicine, if I wasn't afraid you'd think I'd got a touch of Lovett about me. I'm going to have a glass myself, sir, and it can't do you any harm, and it's more likely to do you good, and if you would join me I should take it as a great compliment."

She put a glass of the yellow liquid in front of him. Speakman looked at it suspiciously, but took it into his hand. "Well," he said rather ungraciously, "if you put it like that, Mrs. Waddell. This is something new for me. I've never drunk these home-made wines before. Well . . . Here's your health."

"Thank you, sir. The same to you." Mrs. Waddell sipped delicately.

Speakman raised his glass to his lips, sniffed it,

made a wry face, and drank the stuff down at one go: then, turning, said, "Well, tell my daughter I shall be back about four o'clock."

Mrs. Waddell politely held open the door for him, and murmured as she watched him walk heavily down the garden path, "Well, he didn't seem to think much of my dandelion wine: I dare say he's better used to stronger beverages." She returned to her cake.

Speakman went on slowly through the village, and presently, unobserved, entered the church, where, some half an hour later, the Vicar found his dead body, huddled up against the wall inside the porch.

## 4

At a quarter to four a motor-bus bound for Chesworth stopped at the cross-roads, a mile outside the village, and picked up Partridge. He was now completely sobered and badly frightened. He had struck across country from his point of departure, the churchyard, and to his relief had met no one. There were few passengers on the bus and those all strangers. When he had reassured himself on this point he began to recover confidence. He was soon sufficiently sure of himself to think out a course of action, and by the end of the hour's run he had decided exactly what to do.

Five minutes later the girl in Flower's, the biggest



motor dealers in Chesworth, was looking Partridge up and down, and making up her mind that she disapproved of him: he was much too glib and it was easy to see that he drank too much.

"I have no recollection of an appointment," she said coldly. "What is the name?"

"Partridge. That is my humble patronymic."

She shook her head.

"When I did myself the honour of waiting upon Mr. Flower at four o'clock, I was informed that he was in conference, and my interlocutor requested me to return in an hour's time."

"Who did?"

"My interlocutor. The person with whom I held conversation. A man in overalls."

"Then you saw somebody who had no right to speak for Mr. Flower. Anyway, he's left the office and won't be back until to-morrow morning."

"I have been misled by an underling," exclaimed Partridge bitterly. "Put not your trust in mechanics. Suspect those who wear overalls. Labour in vain is the bitter fruit of those who do not go at once to the fountain-head. To-morrow may never come, but should it dawn in accordance with the usual routine it would not find me without engagements." He made a show of consulting his diary. "Nine . . . nine-forty-five . . . eleven-fifteen. I think I might interpolate an entry at ten-thirty. Would you be good enough to intimate to Mr. Flower that . . ."

The girl broke in. "I'll tell Mr. Flower you'll call at half-past ten, but I can't say whether he'll see you. What was it you wanted?"

"The prospective interview concerned a possible engagement as salesman."

"Oh, you're after a job?" said the girl, inserting a fresh sheet of paper in her typewriter. "It's quite useless to ask Mr. Flower for a job at the present time. Come if you like, but you'll be wasting your time."

Thereupon she rattled away so noisily on her typewriter that Partridge's reply was drowned. He bowed ironically and betook himself to the house of an old acquaintance, a schoolfellow now retired on private means. He found Goodfellow pottering about in his garden on the Worthing road.

"Hullo, Partridge, what brings you here?" Goodfellow leaned on a hoe and looked at his caller distrustfully. He had known Partridge long enough to feel a slight sinking of the heart when he saw the swaggering fellow come up the path.

"Affairs, old man. Business affairs. You can be of service to me."

"So long as it's not money," said Goodfellow, avoiding the gambit. "Money's deucedly tight at present. No one's paying any dividends. In fact I'm living in daily expectation of being distrained upon for rates. You must forgive me, but I thought at first you were the broker's man. I'm at my wits' end to raise the needful. You haven't a fiver to

spare at the moment, I suppose? No? Oh, well, I'll just have to hang on in the faint hope of something turning up. Clutching at straws, you know. I've never known a time when I was so hard pressed for money."

That was Goodfellow all over, thought Partridge. He anticipated one's moves and played to forestall them. That was his chess training.

"No, old man, the last thing I thought of asking you for was money," he replied with simple dignity. "It would be a great happiness to me if I could accommodate you with the sum you mentioned, but I have only provisioned myself for the voyage. How is Mrs. Goodfellow?"

"She is moderately well, thanks."

"I am delighted to hear it. Have you had the pleasure of a visit from the boy recently?"

"No, since he married we see very little of him. Things are very quiet."

"It is almost incredible," burst out Partridge with sudden vehemence, "the pomp and circumstance with which wretched little tradesmen surround themselves in these degenerate times. I offer Flower my services in the capacity of salesman. I journey to Chesworth especially to see him. When I call at four I am told to return at five. When I return at five I am informed that the interview has been deferred until to-morrow at half-past ten. Is that chivalrous treatment? Do you call that courtesy?"

"No, I don't. Flower is a decent fellow too. I expect it's the understrappers who are responsible."

"As you will readily suppose, a night at an hotel here had not entered into my calculations. I am unprovided with suitable apparel."

"Why not go home again and come back in the morning?"

"The omnibus service does not dovetail into my arrangements, and the railroad offers no better facilities."

"Are you sure, old man? I have a time-table in the house and . . ."

"Save yourself the trouble," said Partridge hastily. "I have already studied the time-tables and with growing despair. It would be impracticable to return home and to show up again to-morrow with that punctuality which is so much esteemed in princes and, I trust, in more humble personages like myself."

Goodfellow put on the best face he could assume.

"Don't worry about it, old man. We'll fix you up."

"I knew I could depend on you, Goodfellow. Do me the justice to believe, though, that I should not think of putting you to the inconvenience, if I had not known that you would have a spare bed at your disposal in the absence of your son."

"That's all right, old man. Always pleased to do what we can. There's no money in the house, and probably nothing but bread and cheese for supper. I shan't be able to offer you a drink. I doubt whether

the bed's aired, and I have an idea that the man was coming to cut off the electric light. It's to be hoped it doesn't rain during the night, for the roof leaks into the spare bedroom, and we can't afford to have it seen to. Still, if you are sure you don't mind roughing it for once . . ."

Mrs. Goodfellow, a cipher, proved accommodating. Partridge spent an abstemious evening playing chess with Goodfellow, and winning consistently. When they went to bed at a reasonable hour, he congratulated himself upon having established an alibi, and he slept the calm sleep of a healthy child.

Such a simple nature had Partridge, whose movements also on that day became of interest to at least one person later.

## CHAPTER III

### QUESTIONS OF MORALS

#### I

A THIRD person whose movements on the fatal day offered material for conjecture was Lovett. When he escaped from Mrs. Waddell on the arrival of Councillor Speakman, he hurried very rapidly down the garden path and darted into the road to cannon into a stout, youngish man in rough tweeds.

"Hullo, Lovett, going for a walk? Excellent. I was hoping for a companion." Montgomery thrust his arm in the little man's arm. "I was with young Telford, but left him at the King's Arms. The saloon bar was full of Helmstone councillors, and I really couldn't stay. I told them I couldn't stay. I hope they understood the moral motives prompting my action. Do you think they would?"

"I don't know," muttered Lovett. "I'm in a hurry." He quickened his pace.

Montgomery retained his hold and hurried along too. They were almost running, arm in arm, along the village street.

"It was quite impossible for me to have any inter-

course with persons who propose to tolerate a motor-racing track on the Downs." Montgomery went on talking as casually as if they were not racing through the village in this ridiculous way. "I really could not stay in the same room with them. I might be tempted to address them in terms which I should regret in cooler moments. So I wished them good afternoon and came away. I don't know what young Telford thought. He's a . . . I say, look out!"

Lovett had slipped from the other's arm. There were shouts, the grinding of a car's brakes, a skid, an old gentleman furiously angry . . .

For a moment Montgomery did not take it all in. Then he realized that Lovett had made an injudicious attempt to cross the street in the path of Doctor Prout's car, and had very nearly been run down. There was Lovett, white-faced and trembling, but unhurt; and Doctor Prout, standing up in his car, his old-fashioned hat tilted back above a face that was almost apoplectic with rage, upbraided him.

"You scoundrel, you! I know why you did it. You want to make a martyr of yourself to attract public sympathy. I dismiss you, and only just in time to prevent you from poisoning my patients, and you lie in wait and seize your opportunity, and deliberately throw yourself in front of my car. Yes, deliberately, I saw you do it; and I suppose you have left a letter for the coroner, saying you were driven to it by my unfair treatment. Yes, sir, I know the sort of man you are, but, thank God, I am still in

possession of all my faculties, and saved you from immolating yourself under my car. If you want to kill yourself, and Heaven knows why a nincompoop like you should wish to keep alive, don't try to do it at my expense, or I'll have you run in for being a public danger. Bah!" And Doctor Prout shook his fist.

Lovett showed no sign of wishing to reply to this tirade. Montgomery felt it his duty to speak up.

"My dear doctor," he said mildly, "I think you are a little unfair. Nobody would willingly throw himself in the way of a car unless he were crazy."

"Of course he's crazy. The man's an utter lunatic. He ought to be shut up."

"Oh, come, doctor," urged Montgomery with calm politeness, "you know very well that the opinion of one medical man is not sufficient to certify insanity. You must allow other people to disagree until the case is proved. I do not think you ought to come out with such wild accusations. A little excess of language is natural when persons are in a state of excitement, but a doctor should never allow himself to get into a state of excitement."

Doctor Prout spluttered with wrath. The swollen veins stood out on his forehead.

"You . . . you . . . you organist!" Having found the correct epithet he looked round, observed for the first time that his car had slewed off the road and was within a foot of the village pond, and automatically set himself to reverse. The operation cooled



him down somewhat, and all he permitted himself to remark as he drove on was, "There are two of you. A couple of lunatics. I'd have you both certified. Bah!"

Montgomery linked arms again with Lovett, who still trembled, and urged him quickly on.

"You know," he said, "I think I must say in all justice to Prout you were at least equally to blame. That does not excuse the regrettable outburst we have just heard. It is unpardonable in a medical man to lose control of himself like that. But what possessed you to dart away into the middle of the road? It was one of the most careless acts I have seen. Honestly, Lovett, if there had been an inquest I should have felt myself obliged to absolve Prout from all culpability."

Lovett, walking mechanically by his side, did not reply.

"Don't talk if you don't feel like it," went on Montgomery kindly. "You must be suffering from shock. I feel the best thing we can do is to take a long walk together and give you a chance to recover yourself. Let us go up this lane and get on to the Downs. The air up there will soon blow away the cobwebs. It would be wise to talk about something that will distract your mind. You are interested in the medicinal properties of herbs. I have not studied the subject and so I do not hold any views on the matter, though I confess I instinctively distrust the herbalists who advertise that they are prepared to

cure any disease for a small fee, including those that have baffled the doctors. Would you like to talk to me about herbs? ”

Lovett made an effort to break away.

“Let me go,” he said. “I want to be alone.”

“My dear fellow,” replied Montgomery, tightening his grip, “you are not fit to be alone at present. I have no intention of leaving you. Strictly speaking, I should now be making my way to the church for a little practice, but that must wait. You need not be afraid that I shall abandon you before you are fully yourself again. I wish you would tell me a little about herbs, not only to quiet your mind, but also because it would interest me very much. I try as I go about the world to encourage every man I meet to talk about his own special subject. It is one of the best ways of adding to one’s stock of information.”

“I wish you would let me go. I want to be by myself.”

“I couldn’t think of it. Do calm yourself, my dear fellow, and give me the benefit of your knowledge of herbs. As I was saying, I like to draw a man out. Charteris, for example, takes a great pleasure in trying to invent new cocktails, and he is full of curious information on the subject: the materials used, the proportions in which they are blended, the origin of the sometimes curious names by which they are called, and so on. Telford writes sonnets, and though a knowledge of the intricacies of

that poetic form are of no immediate value to me in my own humble spare-time literary labour of writing a history of this parish, yet I feel the time is not wasted when I can get him to talk seriously about it. I am afraid that is not often, because he is inclined to be frivolous. Now you are far from being a frivolous person, and I am sure anything you told me about herbs would be of the greatest possible interest. You might begin by taking one of the commonest herbs, and describing its appearance, its manner of growth, its properties, and how it is best prepared for use. Now here" . . . the stoutish young man had climbed the hill with ease, talking all the time, and he now paused and waved his hand. They had reached the summit of a small ridge: on their right the ground sloped gently, on the left it persisted in the same mind for a few yards and then took a precipitous header into the valley below . . . "Now here, I suppose," said Montgomery, "a trained eye like yours would find dozens of valuable herbs where my own sees nothing but grass-covered chalk."

The light of cunning came into Lovett's eyes. He edged his companion off the road to the left.

"We shall find a very interesting herb here. It grows on the edge of the slope. No, a little farther. A little farther still."

"But, I say," remonstrated Montgomery, "this is a dangerous place. If we lost our footing we might easily break our necks."

"I can see it now. Just a little way down. Yes, there it is." Lovett's voice rose to a scream. "Stop holding me. Let me go. Let me go, I say. You must let me go. Ah-h-h!" He wrenched himself away and poised himself on the edge of the precipitous slope. He was about to fling himself into space when his foot slipped on the dry grass and he fell backwards. He was sliding over the brink feet foremost when Montgomery gripped his shoulders and with a great effort tugged him back to safety.

"My dear chap," said Montgomery, sitting down beside him, and looking at him with solicitude in his pale blue eyes, "I think Providence must have specially appointed me to be with you this afternoon. There is first the episode of the motor-car and now this. I had no idea herb-collecting was attended with such risks. Those who go after the edelweiss on Alpine peaks subject themselves, I have always understood, to great danger: but it had never occurred to me that equal perils awaited the unwary botanist on our quiet Sussex Downs. How are you feeling?"

Lovett sat up suddenly.

"I am feeling remarkably well," he said, after reflecting for some moments with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Then, if you are all right again, you must forgive me, my dear fellow, if I venture to say that you acted somewhat imprudently. A casual observer, not knowing you, would have thought that you wilfully

tried to throw yourself over the edge. Of course, I do not think that. I know it was only your zeal as a herb-collector that made you act in so reckless a manner."

"What is the time?" asked Lovett.

"It is now a quarter to four."

"How long have we been out together?"

"It must be about three quarters of an hour."

"I don't understand it at all," said Lovett.

"Understand what, my dear fellow?"

"Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter."

Montgomery looked at him in concern.

"You are sure you are feeling all right? Is there perhaps a certain, shall I say, lightness of head?"

"I'm quite all right. Amazingly all right."

"I am very glad to hear it," said the organist doubtfully. "And now what shall we do? Shall we stroll a little farther or do you think you ought to go back and get to bed with, say, two or three aspirins and some hot milk?"

Lovett took out a dilapidated pocket-book and without a word began to count the money he found in it. There was five pounds in all.

"I must go into Helmstone," he said suddenly.

"There is something I want to buy."

"But, my dear fellow, how do you propose to get to Helmstone?"

"I shall walk."

"Do you know your way across the Downs?"

## QUESTIONS OF MORALS

"I shall find my way," said Lovett with a strange smile. "I have seen a sign."

"Of course," admitted Montgomery, a little puzzled, "if you have seen a sign you will know which turning to take. Still, it's a long way to walk, and I am not sure that you are really in a fit state. If you insist on walking to Helmstone, I must come with you, much as I dislike the place. We could probably pick up the bus somewhere."

"Montgomery," said Lovett earnestly, "are you a friend of mine?"

"Why, yes, of course, my dear fellow."

"Then let me go my own way. Otherwise we shall quarrel. No harm will come to me. I think you may let your mind be at peace on that point. I wish you well. Good-bye."

He turned and walked rapidly away along the narrow road. Montgomery made at first as if to follow, but he changed his mind, and stood watching with anxious eyes until the little man had disappeared round a bend in the lane.

## 2

Miss Perks sat by the fireside in Mr. Winstanley's drawing-room and sternly meditated upon the lack of manners in the younger generation: for in her eyes Mr. Winstanley belonged to the younger generation. The tea-table was spread: it lacked only the tea-pot. It lacked the tea-pot because its lord and master had

not yet put in an appearance, although the glass-domed clock on the mantelpiece marked twenty minutes past the appointed hour. Miss Perks reflected that in her time it would have been considered the height of discourtesy to have kept a newly arrived guest waiting so long for her tea. At length the door opened. Miss Perks rose and submitted her cheek to her nephew's dutiful salute.

"Well, how are you, Herbert, after all this time?" she asked with deliberate ambiguity. She looked at him more closely and added, "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

Mr. Winstanley, sitting down with a sigh, deferred his explanation until the maid had brought in the tea-pot and retired.

"I must apologize, aunt. I have been detained. Something rather unpleasant has happened in the village."

"In my experience," said Miss Perks, accepting a cup of tea, "something unpleasant is constantly happening in villages. Especially in the sort of village that people call picturesque. Indeed, the more picturesque the village, the more unpleasant the things that happen. After all, it is only logical. When you consider the lack of sanitation and other civilized conveniences in the average picturesque English village, you cannot expect anything better. If people are brutish enough to be willing to live in villages, it is only natural that they should behave in a brutish way."

Mr. Winstanley put down his cup of tea and stared at his aunt. He was considerably nettled. Did he not himself live in a village, and a picturesque one to boot? Although his own home was amply supplied with the comforts of civilization, he resented Miss Perks's unexpected onslaught as a personal attack. Suitable retorts jostled one another on the tip of his tongue. Villages indeed! Were towns exempt from deeds of brutality? It would be tactless to remind Miss Perks that her own little town of Chesworth had recently been the scene of an unsolved murder; but, to go no further, there was the glaring case of Helmstone, where murders had taken to occurring with such frequency that many quiet families had forsaken the place to spend their holidays elsewhere. Villages indeed!

There were so many possible counterthrusts that Mr. Winstanley had no time to select the most suitable before his aunt calmly continued.

"Well, if the details of the crime are not too gruesome to be narrated at the tea-table, I should be interested to hear them."

"My dear aunt, you are under a misapprehension. There is no question of a crime. We . . . we don't have any very serious crimes in these parts. A man has been found dead in the village church. Probably a simple case of heart failure. Indeed Prout . . . Prout is my own medical man . . . Prout had no hesitation in saying as much, and Prout . . ." Mr. Winstanley hesitated. He remembered the doubts



cast upon Doctor Prout's competence; but he continued boldly, "Prout is a good man. I have the greatest confidence in Prout."

"Who is dead?" inquired Miss Perks, helping herself to a second slice of bread-and-butter.

"A Mr. Speakman, a town councillor from Helmstone."

"All town councillors are rascals. What was such a person doing in the church at this time of day?"

Mr. Winstanley, who had raised his cup to his lips, set it down untasted. Miss Perks had presented him with a ticklish question. She did not seem to have changed at all. It had always been her habit to ask ticklish questions. She liked hitting nails on the head. She had done it again. Strange how all the rest of them had apparently forgotten the incident of the church bells. Was it Speakman who had been responsible for the highly unsuitable tune to which they had listened in shocked silence on the hill? Mr. Winstanley had had a low opinion of Speakman, who wished to build a motor-racing track in the midst of Mr. Winstanley's green and pleasant land; but he could not bring himself to believe that the councillor had committed that sacrilege. Playing music-hall tunes on church bells was not the sort of pastime in which a man of public position could afford to indulge. No, it could not have been Speakman. Then who had it been? Mr. Winstanley looked helplessly at his aunt.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I really have no idea what he was doing in the church."

"I heard somebody playing a tune on the bells," said Miss Perks. "I do not know what the tune was. I did not recognize it as a hymn, but it is a long time since I have darkened a church door. Was the performer this man Speakman?"

"Most unlikely," grunted her nephew.

"As I said, I did not recognize it as a hymn. My acquaintance with music is limited, but I saw a cottager cock his eye towards the church tower, and from the characteristically brutish leer on his face I was led to suppose that the tune was not a hymn. The typically brutish leer of the typically brutish villager," added Miss Perks, taking a sandwich. "If it was Speakman, and if the tune was a ribald one, I have no doubt your superstitious fellow-villagers will consider his heart attack as in the nature of a direct reprisal from Heaven."

"Upon my soul, I believe Pennington was under that impression."

"Your chauffeur? I am not surprised. I have noticed that persons closely connected with the management of motor-cars are of a very primitive type of mind. Akin to the savage. What sort of person was this man Speakman?"

"A builder in a large way of business. He had a hand in many of the new housing estates that have sprung up in the neighbourhood of Helmstone. Only yesterday I saw . . ." Mr. Winstanley repressed

his indignation. A reference at this moment to the Tudor bungalows, he felt, would be akin to speaking disrespectfully of the dead.

"Cheap houses?"

"Mostly so, I believe."

"I know the sort of thing," said Miss Perks, nodding her head vigorously. "I have inspected some in Chesworth. Kitchens the size of cupboards: just about big enough to swing a tin-opener in, which, I suppose, after all, is all the modern housewife wants. Walls mainly composed of windows to save the cost of bricks and mortar. Bedrooms without flues to save the cost of chimneys. I do not call them homes: they are damp and draughty death-traps."

"I believe they save a great deal of labour," put in Mr. Winstanley, trying to preserve an attitude of impartiality.

"Flats and labour-saving houses," said Miss Perks with emphasis, "are the curse of the age. Women don't know what to do to occupy their time. Hence the greater part of our present troubles."

"As to that, I cannot say," said Mr. Winstanley, and he went on quickly, "but, to return to Speakman, he was a person of some importance. I believe he had considerable influence on the Helmstone Council. You may have heard of the scheme for building a motor-racing track on the Downs. It has been criticized. I have criticized it myself. If I refrain from saying what I think of it at this moment,

it is because Speakman was emphatically in favour of it."

"People who want to race in motors have, I suppose, a right to do so." Miss Perks reached out for another sandwich and was gallantly met half-way. "Thank you. It is strange that they should want to risk their necks in such a pursuit, but it is not for me to stop motorists risking necks: so long as they confine themselves to risking their own necks. After all, it can scarcely be said that the safety of motorists' own necks is a subject of grave concern to the general public. We are too much occupied in saving our own. All I would insist upon, if they wish to risk their own necks, is that they should do so out of sight, sound and hearing of everybody else."

Mr. Winstanley considered. "It appears that you would relegate racing motorists to an otherwise uninhabited island, situated some distance out to sea."

"Yes," said Miss Perks. "I should. What did you do about this proposed racing track?"

"I did what I could by helping to organize the agitation against it."

Miss Perks grunted.

"Well, what would you have done?" asked her nephew petulantly.

"Murdered the promoters," answered Miss Perks, selecting a chocolate biscuit. "Cheerfully."

Mr. Winstanley looked a little shocked.

"Was this man Speakman well known in the village?" pursued his aunt.

"His daughter is resident here, in lodgings. She is an admirable woman in many respects: a little too much devoted to her dog." Mr. Winstanley glanced down at his trouser legs. "However," he added generously, "that is a weakness she shares with many other admirable women. Unfortunately, too, she has a disreputable husband. He is an ex-officer but he squanders his pension and every penny he can borrow on drink and dissipation, and I fear she has to exist in the direst poverty."

"Why doesn't the fool leave him?" demanded Miss Perks.

Mr. Winstanley shrugged his shoulders. "I admire Mrs. Partridge for that among other reasons," he said simply. "In spite of everything she sticks by her husband."

"Then the more fool she," said Miss Perks, taking another piece of cake. "I suppose her father, this man Speakman, had to help to support her?"

"I gather he tired in the end of Partridge's importunity. She is very frank about her concerns. She told me her father had declined to help her any further unless she washed her hands of him."

"That is the first thing I have heard you say to this man Speakman's credit. He was well-to-do, I suppose?"

"So far as one can judge from outward appearance, I suppose he was."

"Had he anybody else to leave his money to?"

"Mrs. Partridge is his only child."

"There are homes for waifs and strays and dogs and cats," said Miss Perks thoughtfully, "and there are hospitals and colleges, but I surmise that Speakman was not the sort of man to endow strangers. So there is at least one other person with a strong motive for wishing him out of the way."

"My dear aunt!"

"You need not pretend to be shocked. If you live in a village, among typical peasants, and don't know what men will do for money, you must have kept your eyes and ears shut."

"Upon my word, I should scarcely call the Partridges typical peasants," said Mr. Winstanley, who very much disliked the course the conversation had taken.

"Perhaps not," said Miss Perks, smiling grimly. "Your housekeeper looks after you well: this is excellent cake."

"Is it?" asked Mr. Winstanley gloomily. "I dare not touch it."

"But I suppose I may have another piece?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Thank you. Well, if your Doctor Prout, no doubt an excellent man, is of opinion that death was due to heart failure, we shall have to acquit Partridge and Mrs. Partridge. You need not look so shocked. Let us hope that if her father did leave her his money he took care to tie it up so that this worthless husband of hers could not touch a penny of it." Miss Perks finished her cake, pushed back her chair,

declined further offers of nourishment, and stood up. "Where is this dissolute fellow Partridge?" she asked suddenly. "Does anybody know?"

"No one seems to know, but," explained Mr. Winstanley, "that is by no means unusual. He often disappears for days at a time. Actually he was seen this afternoon in the village on his return from one of these absences, but now he is not to be found."

"Was he seen to enter the church?"

"I don't know."

Miss Perks grunted.

"So that is how the affair stands?" she said. "Well, I must go and write a letter to Robert to inform him of my arrival."

"Please give Uncle Robert my kind regards," said Mr. Winstanley, politely holding open the door.

He returned to his chair and picked up the *New Statesman*, but he could not give his mind to politics. He dropped the paper and reflected that Miss Perks would cut no mean figure as prosecuting counsel for the Crown. She had made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. He asked himself again who had played that scandalous tune on the bells. If it could not be Speakman, was it Partridge? Then had Partridge and Speakman met in the church and, if so, what had passed between them?

"Yet," he reminded himself, "Prout was quite confident that Speakman died of heart failure. On the other hand they say Prout is getting old, getting

80

past his job. Upon my soul, I don't know what to make of it."

Common sense, returning, caused Mr. Winstanley to shrug his shoulders and blame himself for his doubts and misgivings. They were so obviously unnecessary. Prout was noted for his caution: it had grown even excessive as advancing years crept upon him. If there had been the least shadow of doubt about the cause of Speakman's death, Prout would certainly have communicated with the coroner and there would have been a post mortem.

Mr. Winstanley breathed again when common sense had won its victory, and then he remembered that there was trouble in another quarter. What was it the Vicar had wanted to speak to him about?

Mr. Winstanley's thoughts turned to Pennington. He would not have believed it of Pennington, but, there you were, one never knew. He was glad to hear the maid announce the Vicar. Now he would soon learn the worst.

3

According to the Vicar, there was not the slightest doubt that Councillor Speakman had died of heart failure.

"Prout had no hesitation whatever in certifying the cause of death."

"But Prout . . . I am afraid people have shaken my confidence in Prout."

"He is getting old, like the rest of us, but he has



not yet sunk into senile decay, my dear Winstanley. In a good many ways there are, as they say, no flies on Prout yet. No, indeed, the flies are not yet able to find a peaceful resting-place on Prout," added the Vicar, who, whenever he used a colloquial phrase, liked to play with it a little, just to show that he was employing such language in a jocular mood. "No, the flies must settle elsewhere. I fancy Prout knows as much as the young 'uns about heart failure. He must have seen a good many hearts fail in his time."

"Well, if he's quite certain . . ." Mr. Winstanley felt a little happier.

"He rang up Speakman's Helmstone doctor on my telephone, and discussed symptoms in highly technical language. The Helmstone doctor was quite satisfied, as he knew the patient's medical history. He did not want to come over and see for himself."

"He should have come over and seen for himself. Some medical men are altogether too casual."

"He is a busy man with a large practice in Helmstone," said the Vicar indulgently.

Mr. Winstanley shrugged his shoulders. "I gather Mrs. Partridge wishes the funeral to take place here. What have they done with the body?"

"Oh, the undertakers have seen to that," said the Vicar with a slight frown. "I suppose they have something in the nature of a private mortuary."

"How is Mrs. Partridge now?"

The Vicar shook his head. "I am not easy about

Mrs. Partridge, not easy at all. It has come as a very grave shock to her. She has been demanding her husband, and of course the fellow is not to be found. In the ordinary way that would not upset her, but now she seems to take his absence very much to heart. Let us hope she will be better after a night's rest."

Mr. Winstanley took a pace or two up and down the room.

"Vicar, there is one thing I cannot understand. What was Speakman doing in the church?"

"I have thought about that, my dear Winstanley. You have in mind the deplorable episode of the bells. I think we can and must acquit poor Speakman of being concerned in that. He may indeed have entered the church out of curiosity to see who was responsible for . . . for that most unfortunate abuse of the bell-ringing apparatus; but it is more than likely that all that was over before he came along. In all probability he felt tired and went in to rest, just as you or I might. If he was passing the church when he began to feel unwell, what more natural than that he should go inside to sit down for a few minutes?"

"Certainly. Yet Speakman, I understand, was not seated in a pew. I think you found him lying huddled up inside the porch?"

"We can but surmise," said the Vicar gravely, "that he felt worse and staggered towards the door in search of fresh air or help, poor fellow."

"I dare say you are right, Vicar, but it leaves us with an unsolved mystery if we accept that explanation. Who, if not Speakman, played that tune on the bells?"

The Vicar shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly a truant choirboy."

"Would a choirboy play truant and then draw attention to himself like that?"

"If you had had as much experience of choirboys as I have, you would believe them capable of anything. There are one or two in my mind at the moment . . ."

"There is also Partridge," said Mr. Winstanley.

"Partridge was about at the time," admitted the Vicar, "and, although it is not a charitable thing to say, I can believe him capable of the escapade."

"Upon my soul, I believe you are right."

There was silence for a couple of minutes. The Vicar was leaning back in that attitude which suggested he was about to replenish a non-existent pipe from a pouch he did not possess. Mr. Winstanley's thoughts turned uneasily to Pennington. The Vicar was thinking of someone else.

"You had something to say to me privately," prompted Mr. Winstanley.

The Vicar frowned. "I was about to come to that. It is a delicate subject. I had intended opening it on the Downs this afternoon, but I could not do so when I found that Mrs. Partridge was present."

"I wonder if I have guessed correctly what it is

you have to speak to me about. I am afraid I have. I am extremely sorry, for it is always distressing when a person in whom one has placed a certain amount of confidence proves to be unworthy of it."

"Then you have heard?" said the Vicar. "I wondered if the local gossip had reached you. I am exceedingly glad that it has, because I feared that what I had to tell you might come as a grave shock to you."

"I have heard nothing, but it is easy to guess. Unfortunately I have had similar experiences before. It will not be the first time that I have had to act as a censor of morals. A trying position for an elderly unprotected bachelor, eh, Vicar?"

"You ought to marry, Winstanley," said the Vicar, mounting his favourite hobby-horse. "Man was not made to live alone. A well-chosen wife would be a power for good in the village. It is not too late, I think? It is never too late to mend. Still," he added, dropping his jocular tone, "this is a difficulty you must deal with yourself. I fear it calls for drastic action on your part."

"Really?" asked Mr. Winstanley, startled. "You would be as stern as all that? I should have expected you to suggest that a suitable weekly payment could be agreed upon . . . something suited to the circumstances of both parties."

"I don't quite understand," said the Vicar, looking extremely perplexed.

"That is the usual thing, isn't it? It would be

best if we could settle it among ourselves, to avoid the unpleasantness of police court proceedings."

"One would certainly wish to avoid police court proceedings, but in the circumstances . . ."

"You think I must be severe?" asked Mr. Winstanley dubiously. "You wish me to make an example for the good of the village?"

"Well," said the Vicar, moving uncomfortably, "what it comes to is this. Is it better to act firmly now, or to allow this evil to go on festering in the village until the police take action?"

That was rather strong language, thought Mr. Winstanley, raising his eyebrows. Pennington must be far worse than he dreamed: a notorious character for miles around, indeed, if he were described in such terms. He had thought better of Pennington. Still, Mr. Winstanley knew that he was not a very observant person, and that often he was the last to hear of matters which had been the main topic of local scandal for months.

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley, "is it as bad as that? I should never have imagined such a state of things. If things are as you hint, I must certainly make a change there. My own personal comfort must not be considered for a moment, naturally. I must say, though, that I have never before felt in such safe hands as . . ."

The Vicar was staring at him with wide-open eyes.

"I fear, my dear Winstanley, we are at cross purposes. What do you suppose I am referring to?"

"Really, Vicar, when you wish to speak to me on an important matter, and shy at doing so in the presence of a lady, I can only assume that you wish to raise some moral question." Mr. Winstanley was a little ruffled. "I have been trying to explain, to the best of my poor ability, that I think you are taking a rather extreme view of what after all, though an unfortunate matter, is a common incident in country life. . . ."

"Far from it, I hope," said the Vicar gravely.

Mr. Winstanley waved a hand and continued his remarks.

"However, since I place implicit confidence in your judgment, at any rate when it concerns a question of immorality . . ."

"My dear Winstanley," protested the Vicar, smiling.

"I propose to sacrifice my own personal feelings, and, in deference to your advice, get rid of him."

The Vicar sat upright.

"Get rid of . . . whom?"

"My dear Vicar, I am not the guardian of the morals of the whole village. If you raise such a question with me, I presume you refer to one of my domestic staff, and since Pennington is my one male servant, I take it for granted that you wish me to get rid of Pennington, the only chauffeur I have ever had who has made me feel even moderately safe in my own car."

"And why should you get rid of Pennington?" asked the Vicar mildly.

"Why should I get rid of Pennington? My dear Vicar, have you not been urging me for the last twenty minutes to get rid of Pennington?"

"Not that I am aware of. In fact, my dear Winstanley, I am not aware that I have as much as mentioned his name. What has Pennington been up to?"

"So far as I know," said Mr. Winstanley, making a gesture of helplessness, "he has not been up to anything, but directly you mentioned the subject I could only assume that he . . . Your method of approach, my dear Vicar," he added sadly, "led me to suppose a scandal in my own household, and therefore I at once thought that Pennington . . ."

The Vicar sighed.

"I blame myself, my dear Winstanley. If we have been at loggerheads, it is my own fault for failing to be more explicit. The excellent Pennington is not in question. I hope you will relieve your mind on that subject. So far as I know, he is a perfect model. No, my dear Winstanley, the trouble is elsewhere. It is a far more serious matter I came to broach than any likely delinquency on the part of the admirable Pennington. No, we must look to another quarter. I am afraid I have to speak to you, Winstanley" . . . the Vicar glanced at the door and lowered his voice . . . "about one of your tenants. To be precise, about Mrs. Burwash."

"Mrs. Burwash . . . that plump good-natured woman to whom I let Rosemary Cottage a few months ago?"

"The same."

"Dear me," said Mr. Winstanley. "I thought her a very suitable tenant. A nice woman, too. She is one of the few women who seem able to set me at ease in their company."

"I fear that is a professional knack."

"My dear Vicar," exclaimed Mr. Winstanley, "what are you suggesting?"

"I am sorry to say there is much scandal in the village about her."

"Good heavens, have I let one of my cottages to a pro . . . to a promiscuous woman?"

"I should not use that term," said the Vicar gravely. "I imagine she exercises a certain amount of selection. There seems little doubt about her means of livelihood, however, I regret to say. She is in the habit of receiving visitors at unsuitable hours. One of the men who frequent her house is none other than our disreputable friend Partridge. There are others of heavier metal, including . . . but perhaps I had better not mention names."

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley.

"It is only human nature after all," said the Vicar sadly, "and we may well ask ourselves who are we that we should cast the first stone. Yet, obviously, you must know what is going on, my dear Winstanley, for your own sake. I, for my part, shall make



it my business to see this woman and try to do something for her. It will be best for all of us if she leaves the village and makes a fresh start elsewhere."

"She must go, I suppose. She took the cottage on a monthly tenancy, and I shall write to her to-night and give her notice to quit. There is no need to specify a reason, I hope?"

"Not at all. Much better not to." The Vicar rose with a sense of relief. "Well, I am glad I have got that off my chest. My chest is a good deal easier now. We have to do some trying things sometimes, and it is difficult to know how to act for the best, but in this case there is so obviously no option."

Mr. Winstanley saw the Vicar off the premises. As soon as the good man had gone, Pennington came up to the doorway in which his employer stood to speed the parting guest.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought you ought to know," he said, touching his cap, "we shall need a new tyre. The one that went down this afternoon is getting past it."

"Like poor old Prout," thought Mr. Winstanley dreamily. "Very well," he said good-humouredly. "Order a new one and have it put down to me. And, Pennington . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"I want to tell you that I am highly pleased with you. Not only your driving, Pennington, but your . . . your general character and behaviour. So long as you go on conducting yourself with decorum,  
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Pennington, we shall get along very well together. Meanwhile, to mark my approbation, I propose to give you an increase in wages."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Pennington, elated, yet puzzled at finding his wages raised on this mournful occasion of the demise of an elderly tyre. "I trust I shall continue to give satisfaction, sir."

"I trust you will," said Mr. Winstanley sincerely.

Pennington, simple soul, hurried round to the back to communicate the good news to Mr. Winstanley's parlourmaid, for whom he nourished a fervent but respectful admiration. His employer went to his desk to write a letter to Mrs. Burwash.

## CHAPTER IV

### SISTERS UNDER THE SKIN

#### I

NEXT morning at breakfast Mr. Winstanley was delighted, even relieved, to find that Miss Perks preferred the perusal of the news to the exchange of conversation. He politely gave her the sole use of *The Times* while he opened his letters. Presently he grunted something which made Miss Perks look up.

"I see that man Lloyd George is up to his games again," she said. "He is old enough to know better. What is the matter, Herbert?"

"I don't know what to make of this. It comes in an envelope plainly addressed to me, and I can't see any sense in it at all."

"An anonymous letter?"

"Not exactly. It is signed with an initial and it contains nothing scurrilous. I simply can't make head or tail of it. Why don't people put their names and addresses on their letters and write so that people can understand them?"

"I have long since ceased to wonder why people do this, that and the other. Since your letter contains nothing scurrilous I should pay no attention to it. The European situation grows worse and worse. We had better have another war and be done with it."

"But I don't like receiving letters I can't make head or tail of," said her nephew fretfully.

Miss Perks put down *The Times*. "I suppose I must have a look at this mysterious letter," she said, in as near an approach as she could manage to the tone in which a kindly aunt offers to inspect a childish hurt.

Mr. Winstanley handed it to her without a word. It was written on cheap paper in shaky handwriting, and it ran:

I ought to have told you where to find it. It is behind Chambers's Dictionary on the shelf. You might take the dictionary as well as the other book. This will be an excuse for going to my room. You can say you are borrowing them.

A.

"I love my love with an A, because he is anonymous," said Miss Perks unexpectedly, as she passed the letter back. "Don't you recognize the writing?"

"No."

"It seems to have been written by a person labour-

ing under stress of mental agitation. Otherwise there would be no excuse for such a scrawl. Where was it posted?"

Mr. Winstanley examined the postmark from all angles.

"Illegible," he declared at length.

"Postmarks always are. This great age of ours has not yet invented a legible postmark. I suppose that is because a legible postmark would be a really useful thing. Don't you know anybody whose name begins with A . . ."

"A host of people."

"If you would allow me to finish my sentences," said Miss Perks tartly, "I was going to ask you whether you know anybody whose name begins with A, who has a copy of Chambers's Dictionary, who wants you to go to his room . . . I was going to say his or her room, but I know how easily shocked you are . . . who has to provide you with an excuse for visiting his or her . . . his room, I mean . . . yes, it is undoubtedly a masculine hand: you are acquitted, my dear Herbert . . ."

"My dear aunt!"

"And who is likely to write you brief and friendly if somewhat cryptic notes?"

"No one at all."

"Then there has been some mistake. I shouldn't worry about it. Now I want to go on reading about Hitler. I have a sneaking admiration for that man, although I cannot say I admire his moustache."

Although Partridge had slept well, his fears returned to him in the morning. He cut himself while shaving and came down late to breakfast. Goodfellow looked up from his newspaper as his guest entered the room.

"What was your father-in-law's name, old man?"

"Speakman."

"A Helmstone town councillor, eh?"

"A municipal luminary." Partridge spoke in the lightest tone he could manage. "Is there something in the paper about him?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid."

"What?" Partridge let fall the piece of dry toast he had taken and gazed at Goodfellow theatrically. "You do not tell me that he is . . ."

"Had a sudden heart attack and died in your village. They found him dead in the church."

"In the church!"

"You'd better have a look at the paper, old man," said Goodfellow sympathetically. "I see he had suffered from heart trouble. They say it won't be necessary to hold an inquest."

"Thank God!"

The exclamation burst from Partridge in spite of himself. Goodfellow glanced at him curiously, Mrs. Goodfellow with mild indignation.

Partridge hastily took cover. "I fear you may condemn me as heartless. The fact of the matter

is" . . . he became almost natural . . . "it may make all the difference in the world to us. We have been so deucedly hard up for such a devil of a time . . . and it's the wife's loss, not mine. I scarcely knew him. She'll be badly cut up, poor thing. I must get back to her."

"You won't go to see Flower?"

"That had slipped my memory. Naturally I shall keep that engagement. In difficult times one must not neglect the faintest prospect of steady occupation, no matter what the circumstances."

"You never said a truer word, old man. I wish somebody would offer me a well-paid job. Now you make a hearty breakfast. That's the sensible thing to do."

Shortly before half-past ten Partridge left the Goodfellows with every expression of goodwill on both sides. He strolled down the road to Flower's. The girl received him with indifference.

"Mr. Flower is sorry but he can't see you. He has no recollection of asking you to call."

"But this is preposterous. I have stayed the night in Chesworth at excessive personal inconvenience."

"I told you it was at your own risk."

"Have the goodness to inform Mr. Flower at any rate that I am here."

"He knew you were coming. He won't see you."

"Then I shall write him a very stiff letter, and I hope it won't turn out that you've been taking too much upon yourself, my dear."

"You can do what you please. Good morning."

Partridge left the office jauntily, humming a tune. He caught the next bus back, and when it set him down at the crossroads near the village he was feeling uncommonly cheerful.

Fifty yards farther on, a thin and ragged individual, carrying several days' growth of beard on his face, rose from his perch on the edge of a ditch and fell into step with the returned prodigal.

"It's no use, my dear fellow," said Partridge loftily. "I have no change on me."

"How can you," retorted the tramp in a tone of reproach . . . "how can you invoke sordid considerations of finance on a jewel of a morning like this? Should we not rather give thanks that we are alive and out of jail?"

"I dare say you know all about jail."

"True. There are worse places on a wet day, or in the winter when no birds sing; and, granted the possession of an innocent and quiet mind, one can be as cheerful there as elsewhere. Do not incommode yourself by hurrying, my dear sir: my legs are as long as yours. There are, as I was saying, worse places than jail for such as I. What should trouble the peace of one who, in his humble way, follows the example of Robin Hood and takes only from those who can afford to lose? No, my dear sir," said the ragged man, slashing at the hedge with a great ash stick he carried, "imprisonment of the body is of little consequence, but imprisonment of the mind, by



remorse, compunction, and sense of guilt . . . that is the very devil and all."

"I don't think I have the pleasure of knowing you," said Partridge, "and I find your conversation morbid and unpleasing. Good-bye."

The tramp smiled and kept pace with him. After a minute of this embarrassing company Partridge turned upon the fellow.

"What is it you want? I told you I have no money."

"I was hoping for the pleasure of a little friendly companionship to lighten the way. You would not grudge it if you knew what it was for an educated man to go long without intercourse with his equals. There comes a time when even dribblets of sensible talk are like a loaf of bread to a starving child."

"But what would be a suitable subject for conversation?"

"Cabbages and kings, anything."

"Policemen, for example."

"Policemen, if you will, or peacocks, kings or cockatoos, cabbages or campanology. Campanology, now. You are interested in campanology?"

Partridge started. Recovering himself, he said, "I'm not sure that I know what it is, and I am in a great hurry."

"The Oxford Dictionary, I imagine," observed the learned tramp, "would probably define it as the science of bells and bell-ringing. One thinks at once of sweating villagers heaving at ropes in a belfry

chamber, with a great jug of beer somewhere handy : of combinations and permutations of bells, flooding the countryside with their meaningless changes . . . driving near neighbours of the church to madness . . . inspiring the American poet to a wild concatenation of rhymes."

"You are wasted on the road. You should have written copy in an advertising agency."

"So much," said the tramp, "we may take for granted. But whether the word is comprehensive enough to include the manipulation of bells by a device fixed within the church porch, capable of being operated by a single performer . . . I confess I am not sufficiently acquainted with the scope of the term to be able to speak with authority."

"What the devil are you getting at?" demanded Partridge, with very angry face.

"I should imagine, however, that all that is covered by the word campanology. You must be a dabbler in the science of bell-ringing even if you merely stand inside the porch and pluck at little strings to set the bells a-tolling. Therefore I take it, my friend, you are interested to some extent in campanology. I proffer that as a subject of conversation."

"I don't understand half you say, and if you don't cease to pester me and take yourself off, I shall give you in charge."

"Thus spake the pot to the comparatively virtuous kettle." The man cut a flourish with his stick. "My dear sir, let us come to an understanding.

Life's too short to quarrel, as the humble poet remarked. (I need not ask if you are acquainted with the lyrics of the music-hall.) You and I are fellow-voyagers through the not always tranquil seas of life, and at the moment we are both in jeopardy: I drifting rudderless towards the jagged rocks of utter destitution, you . . ."

"Yes?"

"You involved in the snares of the fowler."

"Will you explain what you mean?"

"In my schooldays, when we studied the Scriptures, there was a master . . . how well I remember the dear fellow! . . . who, to our guileless inquiries concerning the meaning of certain passages in the Old Testament, would reply that there were matters on which it was not expedient to be explicit. Yet we chits of boys knew, none better, precisely what was meant to be conveyed by the passages in question. There is here, I think, my dear sir, a fable you will comprehend."

Partridge plunged desperately into a counterattack. "What were you doing in the church? Tell me that."

The tramp waved his stick. "Is the question entirely relevant? Making my private devotions, resting my weary limbs, studying stained glass or squints or slypes or clerestories, proposing to rob the offertory box . . . does it matter what I was doing in the church? The important thing, I take it, is that I was in the church."

"And you saw me playing a tune on the bells. What of it?"

"As you say. I saw you playing a tune on the bells: a gross tune, I regretted to notice, a tune with ribald connotations."

"Well?"

"I am liberal and broad-minded, my dear sir. I was not shocked by your little bit of sacrilege. Thus there was one person present with you in the church who has seen so much of life that he is not easily shocked. As to the other gentleman, I cannot say, nor, I suppose, would it now be easy to ask him."

Partridge stopped. "Are you trying to blackmail me? Blackmail is a dangerous trade."

"No, sir. Nothing is further from my intentions. I merely offer myself as a candidate for charity. I take it I am dealing with a gentleman who, since the unfortunate event of yesterday, has great expectations and is in a generous mood."

Partridge thought rapidly: then put his hand in his pocket and gave the tramp half a crown. "It is perhaps unwise," he said, "but you pestered me on the highway and could not be shaken off, and being in a hurry to get rid of you I handed you money to go away. That is what I shall say when I report the matter to the police and have you charged with begging, and on suspicion of thieving from offertory boxes."

"If you would forgive my offering a little advice intended in the friendliest spirit, you should say

nothing about offertory boxes," said the tramp suavely. "Anything you say about offertory boxes might be used in evidence against you. Why offer the authorities a clue to your movements?"

"To hell with you," said Partridge.

"We shall meet again in any case," said the tramp. He turned and strolled leisurely away in the opposite direction. As he went he whistled softly a music-hall chorus. Partridge knew the tune and squirmed. It was a tune he had grown to dislike intensely.

## 3

"Where's that chap Lovett this morning?" inquired Mrs. Waddell's husband. "He gets on my nerves, that chap does. He's a little drop of misery, he is. I stopped at the door of his shed the other day watching him mixing his poisons. 'Give us a fag,' I said. 'Haven't got any,' he said. 'Have one of mine,' I said. 'No, thanks,' he said. I looked at him, and 'Old Faithful,' I said. I don't think he liked that." Mr. Waddell wheeled out his bicycle. "I've got a new name for him now . . . Jubilee."

"Get along with your nonsense," said his wife. "So long as you don't talk to my better class boarders like that. Or I shall lose my connection. As to Lovett, I don't know where he is. His bed . . . Good morning, Mr. Charteris."

The innkeeper returned a polite good morning.

"Hullo, Jack," called Waddell cheerfully. "Seen

a yard of misery anywhere? We've lost Lovett. Don't bother to send him back if you find him. Cheerioh! Got to go and do a spot of pig-sticking." He mounted his bicycle and rode off to his father's butcher's shop.

"What's this about Mr. Lovett?" asked Charteris.

"He's lost, stolen or strayed," said Mrs. Waddell. "I hope he hasn't thrown himself over a cliff. You never know with those mopers, and if ever there was a moper it was Lovett."

"How long have you missed him?"

"We last saw him yesterday afternoon. He went out just as poor Councillor Speakman called to see his daughter, who wasn't in, and he hasn't been back since. I shan't fret my bones very much if he doesn't come back, for I can't say I was all that fond of him. But he's so absent-minded he's probably gone off somewhere and forgotten where to come back to. He's like those people you used to hear the man on the wireless ask for who were believed to be suffering from loss of memory."

"No news of him at all?" asked Charteris.

"None at all."

"As a matter of fact," said Charteris, "I had come round to see him. He promised to lend me a book of his. His *British Herbal*."

"What! are you starting? Are you going to give your customers herb beer and herb gin? I don't know what they taste like, but I hope they're not as nasty as herb tobacco. I will say for Lovett that he

doesn't smoke. I once had a lodger who smoked herb tobacco and it nearly made my stomach turn to go into his room. Well, if I were you I should go up to his room: you know where it is. Whether you will be able to find the book you want among all that clutter of bottles and things is another matter; and don't let your customers know that you've taken to studying herbs, or they'll be afraid to come to the King's Arms any more for fear of what you may give them."

"Then please keep it dark, Mrs. Waddell," said Charteris with a faint smile. He passed through the kitchen and climbed the stairs to the first floor. Mrs. Waddell, busy with her morning tasks, could hear him moving about upstairs. He was away some ten minutes and when he returned he was carrying a brown paper parcel.

"He's got some interesting books, Mrs. Waddell," said the mild-mannered innkeeper. "I took the liberty of borrowing two or three. If he misses them you will be able to tell him where they are gone. I hope he'll turn up safe and sound. Let me know if you have any news of him."

"Oh, he'll turn up right enough after a bit like a bad penny. How is Mrs. Charteris?"

"Only middling, I am afraid, Mrs. Waddell. She complains a good deal of her health."

"Some people are of the complaining sort," said the landlady without sympathy. "I've no patience with them. Still, we must bear our own burdens."

Charteris moved uneasily. "And Mrs. Partridge? How is she bearing up under her loss?"

"She's taken it rather badly, but I think it's chiefly because her husband hasn't come back. There's another man who'll turn up again, and we should all be better off if he didn't. If I were Mrs. Partridge I should thank my lucky stars if he went away for ever."

"She's a fine woman," said Charteris quietly.

"Too good for the likes of him. I hope her father's left her all his money, and he had plenty, by the looks of him. But you never know what people are going to take it into their heads to do with their money. I went last month to my husband's uncle's funeral, and there was his sister, I mean the late departed's sister, sighing and sobbing all through the service: she thought he'd left her a lot of money and when she heard them read the will and found out she was only going to get five pounds to buy a keepsake with, you really ought to have heard the way she turned on her relations and the language she used, calling them a lot of parasites: yes, that was the word, parasites, who had clung to a crazy old man nobody loved for his own sake and made him leave the money she ought to have had to them who didn't deserve it. Then there was the case of my mother's step-sister who . . ."

Mrs. Waddell was launched into a whole stream of relevant and irrelevant anecdotes. Charteris, who had never learned to manage women who talked too



much (and who could blame him for that in which so many better men had failed?), stood shifting from foot to foot and wishing he could get away with his brown paper parcel.

## 4

It was a lovely morning, this morning on which Partridge returned to the village and Lovett was missing. Mr. Winstanley had to go out on business, and Miss Perks reclined in a deck-chair on the front lawn, having first assured her nephew that she could bear up quite well in his enforced absence.

Presently a plump and comfortable woman, judged by Miss Perks to be about thirty-five, dressed very well but not (Miss Perks thought) quite as a lady should be dressed, hesitated at the gate, walked tentatively up the drive, espied Miss Perks, hesitated again, stepped on to the lawn, and halted a yard or two away from the old lady.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, for disturbing you," she said, in a pleasant though uncultured voice, "but can you please tell me if Mr. Winstanley is at home?"

"No," said Miss Perks. "May I ask why you don't make your inquiries at the proper place?"

The visitor smiled ingratiatingly.

"I thought perhaps you would not mind telling me. I'm sorry Mr. Winstanley is not in. I wanted to see him."

"I guessed as much, or otherwise you would not

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have asked for him," said Miss Perks. "He won't be back until lunch time."

"I don't think I had the pleasure of meeting you before when I called on Mr. Winstanley about the lease of Rosemary Cottage. I mean, when I first took the cottage."

"I was not here then, and so it is not at all surprising that you did not have the pleasure, as you call it, of meeting me. If you wish to know, I am Mr. Winstanley's aunt, and I am staying with him for a few days."

"It is very good of you to tell me. I am pleased to meet you. I am Mrs. Burwash." She gave her name a little timidly, and looked at Miss Perks with some anxiety to see the effect it produced. "I see you haven't heard of me."

"Your name is new to me, Mrs. Burwash. However, I suspect you think I ought to have heard of you."

Mrs. Burwash smiled deprecatingly.

"I am not so conceited as all that. Still, you know how it is in villages: everybody always gets to know all about everybody else. That is why I knew all the time it was a mistake to take Rosemary Cottage, but it was such a pretty little house I really could not resist it. And I thought perhaps you might have heard Mr. Winstanley mention me."

"I gather it is Mr. Winstanley you want to see and not myself?" asked Miss Perks sharply.

"Well . . ."

"For goodness' sake, Mrs. Burwash, say what you want to say and have done with it; but I warn you that I know nothing about my nephew's affairs. I really do not see what I can do for you."

"Well, the fact of the matter is," said Mrs. Burwash, embarking upon a recital of her troubles as placidly as other people would discuss the weather, "it is most unfortunate, but Mr. Winstanley has given me notice to quit. I got his letter at breakfast time. It's upset me a little. You see, it's now three days to the end of the month, and instead of giving me a month's notice, he has sent me a cheque for a month's rent and told me I must leave Rosemary Cottage in the three days."

"He seems uncommonly anxious to get rid of you," said Miss Perks, considering Mrs. Burwash with increased interest.

"I was going to tell him that I couldn't possibly think of accepting his cheque. In fact, I've brought it with me to give back to him. But I did want to ask him if he would allow me to stay a week past the end of the month. It would be a great convenience to me."

"You want more than three days to get your furniture packed for removal, I suppose?"

"Oh, it isn't that. I'm used to removals. I've never stayed very long in one place." Mrs. Burwash blushed: it was a rather becoming blush, thought Miss Perks. "It's only that I happen to know of a house which will be available in ten days' time."

"I see," said Miss Perks.

Pennington became visible near the house. Miss Perks called to him to bring another deck-chair; and she was grimly amused to watch his demeanour when he discovered who the visitor was. Well-trained servant though he was, he even hesitated before he obeyed the order; and he brought the chair with a disapproving frown and set it down at a most respectful distance from Miss Perks. As he withdrew he looked at Mrs. Burwash askance.

"Thank you so much," said Mrs. Burwash. "It's a warm morning and I could do with a bit of a sit down." She waited politely for Miss Perks to resume the conversation.

"I think if I were you," said Miss Perks, "I shouldn't trouble Mr. Winstanley with a personal visit. I will tell him what you have said. Don't thank me: I shouldn't do it if I didn't want to for reasons of my own. As for that cheque, put it back in your bag: keep it at any rate until you know what his answer is. Mr. Winstanley is not to be bothered at present. He felt the shock of Councillor Speakman's death."

Mrs. Burwash made a sympathetic noise and put on a solemn face.

"You knew the man Speakman?" demanded Miss Perks without warning.

Again, that rather becoming flush of red to the cheeks. Mrs. Burwash was silent. Miss Perks, who had guessed her calling, wondered what exactly were

its standards of etiquette. She did not suppose that Mrs. Burwash would speak as freely of her conquests as those Society ladies and actresses of a certain type who write, or get written for them, their reminiscences. She was not sure that Mrs. Burwash would discuss her clients at all.

"Councillor Speakman seems to have had a good many enemies," added Miss Perks.

Mrs. Burwash gazed into the distance. "I don't say he didn't have his faults. All men have. They're like children, you know" . . . Mrs. Burwash's voice took on a maternal note . . . "and most of them are self-willed and a good many are too apt to do things they ought not to. I'm not denying that Councillor Speakman had as many faults as most, but I shouldn't like to think he had been killed in cold blood, as it were."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Perks sharply.

"Well, I have heard it said that he was struck down by Providence."

"And you, a grown woman, with all your experience, listen to that talk?"

"Well, I don't say I believe it."

Miss Perks grunted.

"I shouldn't like to believe it," added Mrs. Burwash. "With all his faults, he didn't deserve that, though it's not for me to question the acts of Providence, if Providence did have any hand in the matter, which I shouldn't like to believe. No, he didn't deserve to be struck down like that."

"No more than the rest of us, I suppose," said Miss Perks. "We're a pretty poor lot when the truth is known; and there are few of us who have a right to criticize the rest of us."

Mrs. Burwash smiled gratefully, for reasons Miss Perks had no difficulty at all in guessing.

"I certainly see no reason to accuse Providence of meddling in the matter," continued the old lady. "There was something fishy about the affair, but it's not Providence I should suspect."

"I don't quite understand."

The devil had entered into Miss Perks. "Are there no rumours in the village?" she demanded maliciously.

"I haven't heard any, but then I know so few people to talk to." Then, as Mrs. Burwash took in the implications of the question, she added, "Oh, what do you mean?"

"What anybody with a grain of sense would know I meant. There are several people who had cause to dislike that man Speakman. One of them, of course, stood to gain more than the rest."

Mrs. Burwash looked thoroughly frightened.

"And he had a bad name to start with," added Miss Perks, enjoying herself. Her sharp eyes watched the effect.

"Give a dog a bad name . . ." Mrs. Burwash sighed: her sympathies were naturally enlisted with those of whom ill was spoken. "I know who it is you mean," she said suddenly. "Of course anybody

would. But I don't believe it. He drinks and . . . and he squanders his money, but kinder heart in some ways no man ever had. You should see him playing with the village children: they worship him."

Miss Perks grunted.

"Children are not good judges of character. How could they be? It's only fools who say they are. They naturally like people who over-indulge them: that is, people with a weak strain in their make-up. That is why you constantly find that scallywags are a great success with children. There's too much sentimental nonsense talked about children and dogs and their instincts. It takes a lifetime of experience to be a moderately good judge of character."

"Mr. Partridge is not capable of such a thing," said Mrs. Burwash stubbornly.

"Well, there are others."

"I couldn't believe it of Lovett either," added Mrs. Burwash thoughtfully.

Miss Perks knew nothing of Lovett. She waited.

"Of course he hated Councillor Speakman. He was a chemist in Helmstone and went bankrupt, poor man, and he got it into his head that Councillor Speakman was to blame. There was no reason to think so, either. It was just a delusion. That little Lovett thinks everybody is persecuting him."

"People who think that are often dangerous."

"Not that little Lovett," said Mrs. Burwash with conviction. "He has no spirit in him. Not that I

know him, but from what I have heard I shouldn't trust him to say Bo to a goose."

"So Lovett is like that, is he?" Miss Perks was much amused. It was strange, she thought, how much information one could come by quite honestly. She tried a shot in the dark. "From what you say, I should imagine the other man is a much more dangerous customer."

"What other man?"

"Well, they had a quarrel, didn't they?"

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Burwash. "I can't tell the rights and wrongs of that. I should think there must be a good deal to be said on both sides."

"When rogues fall out, they say honest men come by their own, and when municipal councillors like that man Speakman quarrel . . ."

"You've got to make allowances," said Mrs. Burwash. "That's what I say. It's a difficult world and you must give and take. Not that it isn't wrong. Still, you can't blame a man if he takes any pickings that are going. It's only human nature after all. But they're foolish to quarrel about it. It would be much more sensible to keep quiet, as I told Councillor Copplesto . . ." She bit her lip. "I'm afraid I'm talking too much. And I'm not what you would call a gossip as a general thing. You've been so kind. You've drawn me out."

"I'm not usually considered a sympathetic character," said Miss Perks.



"I appreciate kindness when I find it in ladies," said Mrs. Burwash simply. "It's not all that common. I thought it very nice of you to make the chauffeur fetch a chair for me and ask me to sit down."

"I'm a wicked old woman," said Miss Perks. Her face relaxed into something like a grin. She was thinking how appropriate it would be to continue, "Tell me, as one bad woman to another . . ."

Mrs. Burwash interpreted the facial contortion as an encouraging smile.

"It's not an easy life," she said quietly. "You see my husband . . . well, he got into some trouble, and he had to go away, and I was left without a penny. There was a gentleman who took pity on me, and I did what I could to repay his kindness, and when he died I got into the way of making respectable acquaintances. Some people look down upon one, but after all I've done nobody any harm, and I think I can say I've been a comfort to a good many gentlemen. It's surprising how they tell one all their troubles."

"I'm sure they do, but I can't help thinking that they may possibly grow jealous of one another."

"I have to be very careful to see that they don't . . ." Mrs. Burwash stopped short, with that becoming blush of hers flooding her cheeks. "I don't know why I'm talking like this. I'm afraid I've taken a great many liberties."

"Fiddlesticks," said Miss Perks.

"And I really mustn't keep you any longer."

"Well," said Miss Perks, "I have very much enjoyed our little talk. I can't answer for Mr. Winstanley, of course, but I will tell him what you want to do about the house."

"Thank you so much. Good-bye. I'm sure I'm very grateful. You've been so kind."

She did not offer to shake hands, but smiled; and went down the drive, a comely and respectable figure, though not, as Miss Perks reflected once more, not just exactly dressed as a lady would dress. Miss Perks smiled at her private reflections.

Pennington also watched Mrs. Burwash go, and the expression on his face afforded Miss Perks much satisfaction to contemplate. He came rather timidly to gather up the vacant deck-chair and hesitated as though he were about to speak.

"Yes, Pennington?" said Miss Perks encouragingly.

Pennington touched his cap and his honest face turned as red as the setting sun.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said awkwardly, "but I think perhaps you ought to know . . ." At this point his embarrassment became too much for him and he was unable to proceed.

"It's all right, Pennington," said Miss Perks placidly. "I think I know what you think I ought to know. And, Pennington . . ."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Never forget, Pennington," said Miss Perks,

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rising, "that the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skins. It's a very useful thing to remember if you want to know how to treat women. You may put away both the deck-chairs, Pennington."

Miss Perks went into the house.

## CHAPTER V

### THIN ICE

#### I

MUCH hill-climbing had been forbidden Miss Perks by her doctor, but there was a useful little motor-bus which made several journeys a day to Helmstone by an indirect route across the Downs; and Miss Perks profited by this convenience to raise herself with comfort to the heights. Mr. Winstanley had placed Pennington and the car at her disposal; but not only did Miss Perks possess a rooted distrust of all private cars and all private chauffeurs, she also had a much rarer and finer trait. She held strongly that guests should make themselves as unobtrusive as possible.

Miss Perks would take her knitting: she was making a pull-over for Robert. Or she would take a book. She was at present engaged in re-reading Kipling. She had given up detective stories since they reminded her of an old friend, a habitual borrower and lender of thrillers, who had died in circumstances she did not care to recall; and she had

decided that, in any case, detective stories were debasing to the mind, besides being notoriously written in the world's worst English.

It became her habit to make for one particular place, within a hundred yards of the road, where a gentle rise in the humpbacked hills offered an extensive view that included a glimpse of the sea. Someone had put a seat at this place, and hitherto Miss Perks had found it in her undisputed possession; but on her third visit, two mornings after her talk with Mrs. Burwash, she saw that it was partly occupied by two earlier arrivals. One of these persons she already knew by sight as Charteris, the landlord of the King's Arms, and the other her experienced eye decided at once must be his wife.

Miss Perks ignored their presence and made herself comfortable, spreading about her the materials for Robert's pull-over. Entirely absorbed in her work as she appeared to be, it was not long, however, before she had summed up to her satisfaction the characters of her neighbours. Charteris she saw as a well-meaning, rather meek man, naturally inclined to be good-tempered with everyone, but irritated to the point of exasperation by his wife. And not without reason, reflected Miss Perks, for Mrs. Charteris only too obviously suffered in an aggravated degree from a malady which is wide-spread in modern times: the disease of self-pity. She would be about five years older than her husband, whom Miss Perks wrote down as forty: she was slovenly in

her dress and in her person, she could not sit still and, above all, she could not remain silent. Already she had reduced her husband to a bundle of nerves: her persistent gabble was having the same effect as the monotonous drip of water on the prisoner undergoing torture. He had long ceased to answer her. He grunted occasionally. That was all.

"Isn't it lovely up here?" Mrs. Charteris was inquiring for the third time. Since her husband failed to reply she continued, "It is lovely, isn't it?" and when no response was yet forthcoming she added, "Eh?"

Charteris grunted. Miss Perks clicked her needles with her eyes fixed grimly on her work.

"And so they didn't come over after all." Mrs. Charteris pursued some topic already ventilated. "They said they would but they didn't. I don't know why they didn't come over, but nobody ever does come over now. Somehow people don't seem to come and see me as they used to. Still, I do think that when they said they would come over, they ought to have come over. I do think that, don't you? Isn't that what you think? Eh?"

Charteris grunted.

"It's not as if they couldn't come, because they have the car, and if they really meant to come there's nothing to stop them coming. Not so far as I can see. I can't see anything to stop them coming, can you? Can you see anything to stop them coming? Eh?"

Charteris said nothing. He did not even grunt. He stared moodily at the distant sea.

"Such a terrible journey back from Helmstone yesterday," began Mrs. Charteris anew. "The bus was full, and I had to stand all the way, and there were several young men in the bus who might quite well have offered me their seats, but somehow nobody ever thinks of offering me a seat. I don't know how it is, but nobody ever seems to think of offering me a seat. I am weary. I have never felt so tired in my life."

Charteris moved uncomfortably.

"Still, I suppose I have to expect that sort of thing. It's the sort of thing I'm used to expecting. The fact of the matter is that I'm not wanted. Nobody wants me. You don't want me. Say you don't want me, Jack. You know you don't want me. You'd be glad to get rid of me, Jack? You would, wouldn't you? Eh?"

"My word," thought Miss Perks, clicking her needles sharply, "if I were Jack I'd give her a straight answer to that question."

"I don't know why it is, but it's always the same way now. You see, even those young men in the bus wouldn't give up their seats to me, though they were perfect strangers. I should have thought any young man would be pleased to give up his seat to a strange lady. But there you are. There's something about me that people seem to dislike. I don't know what it is. I'm sure I do my best to talk to

people and make myself agreeable, and yet they seem to hate me. Don't you think it's too bad? You do think it's too bad, don't you? Eh, Jack?"

Charteris exclaimed, "My God!" and got up and hurried away. His wife looked after him with a bewildered expression. Miss Perks clicked her needles more loudly than ever.

There was a minute's silence. Then Mrs. Charteris began upon the old lady.

"It's lovely up here, isn't it? Don't you think it's lovely? Eh?"

"The view is pleasant," said Miss Perks.

Mrs. Charteris brightened a little.

"It is pleasant. I always say the view is pleasant up here. It is pleasant, isn't it?"

"It is," said Miss Perks.

"I don't know why my husband left me so hurriedly," continued Mrs. Charteris after a slight pause. "There seemed no reason for him to go away so hurriedly. I can't understand it when people go away so hurriedly."

"If you really want to know," said Miss Perks, "I believe I can tell you."

"Oh, can you? Do you really think you can? Yes, I do think I should like to know."

"Your husband went away hurriedly," said Miss Perks as she continued placidly with her knitting, "because you were driving him crazy with your foolish cackling, and he was afraid that if he had



to listen to much more of it he would do something he might be sorry for."

"That's right," said Mrs. Charteris bitterly, "turn against me. I don't know why everybody turns against me. I have never even met you before, and yet you turn against me at once."

"Sorry for the consequences of, of course," murmured Miss Perks.

"I don't know what you mean, but I suppose it's something unkind. You come and sit beside me and are unkind to me. You haven't met me before, but it makes no difference. I don't mind. People may bully me as much as they like, if it gives them any pleasure. I'm sure I wouldn't interfere with their pleasure for the world. Go on. Bully me. I'm used to it."

"Does your husband beat you?" asked Miss Perks, making a careful turn in the pull-over.

"There's a question for a perfect stranger to ask. No, he doesn't beat me. He hasn't beaten me yet. Why? I suppose you think he ought to beat me."

"Why do you make his life a misery to him?"

"I make . . . Has he sent you here to bully me?"

"No," said Miss Perks.

"I don't make people's lives a misery. They make mine a misery. Or perhaps I do. Yes, I dare say I do. I'm a bad, selfish woman. I suppose I ought to die and then I shouldn't make anybody's life a misery. I suppose that's what people would like me

to do. At any rate, that's what you think, isn't it? Eh? "

"How many maids do you keep at the King's Arms?" asked Miss Perks in a matter-of-fact tone.

"There's another question for a perfect stranger to ask. We keep two maids at the Arms. Why do you want to know? "

"If I were you," said Miss Perks evenly, "I should get rid of one of them and do her work myself."

"I see." Mrs. Charteris nodded her head emphatically. "You needn't think I don't understand what you mean, because I do. You're like all the rest. You think I want something to take my mind off myself. That's what you think, isn't it? Eh? "

"As you seem to know all about what I think," rejoined Miss Perks with some acidity, "there's no need for me to tell you."

"But you're not half so clever as you think you are. You don't know what I have to put up with. If I worked my fingers to the bone, it wouldn't make the slightest difference. If I slaved till I dropped, people wouldn't like me any better. You see, I am never liked by people. I don't know why people never like me, but they don't. It's my misfortune. I was born to suffer. Besides, I already do as much work as I can. I can't do any more. I haven't the strength. My health is not good."

"Indeed?" Miss Perks showed a little more interest. She even put down the pull-over and con-

sidered Mrs. Charteris with her wise eyes. "What are the symptoms?"

"Indigestion mostly," said Mrs. Charteris sadly.

"Oh! I expect you eat too much. Most people do. I do myself, but then I inherited a very sound digestion. And now I think I must go on with my knitting."

"I see. You want me to go. You're tired of me. You made me tell you everything you wanted to know, and now you're sick of me, and want to get rid of me. That's it, isn't it, eh?"

"Perhaps it is."

"You're not very kind," continued Mrs. Charteris in her flat, monotonous voice. "You're not really kind at all. Have you no heart? I don't think you can have any heart, or you would not treat me like this."

"If by having a heart you mean being sentimental, then, in your sense of the word, I have no heart. I may have been sentimental once. If so, I should prefer to forget it. It's much safer to take a realistic view of life. Sentimentality has never done any good in the world, and never will. Think, for example, what a poor creature you yourself are, purely because you are afraid to face facts. You imagine yourself an ill-treated person. If you could only see yourself as others see you, you would be humbly grateful for being allowed to exist at all."

Mrs. Charteris bridled. "Well, that is a nice way to talk, I must say. You've been as rude to me as

you possibly could, and I've done my best to answer politely, and now you say things like that. And you tell me you want me to go away. I believe this is a public seat and I have as much right to sit on it as you have, and I was here before you were, too. Still, you want me to go, and I'm going. Only, just let me tell you something before I go. You think yourself very superior, don't you? You're very good at telling people off, aren't you? Do people ever tell you what they think of you? I shall. You're an old cat. A spiteful, interfering, impolite old cat, and as ugly as sin into the bargain, with that great hooked nose of yours, and all that hair on your upper lip! So now you know." Mrs. Charteris's voice had risen to a virago-like pitch with the last few words, and now with as little warning it dropped and was choked with sobs. "You've made me say what I never ought to have said, but I couldn't help it. It was your own fault. You made me do it. I'm going now."

She jumped from the seat and hurried blindly away, as her husband had done before her.

## 2

Miss Perks's eyes followed Mrs. Charteris until the retreating figure was hidden by a bend in the lane below; and then, turning her head, she became aware that this concluding episode had been witnessed by a hatless young man wearing a blue pull-over tucked

into his trousers. He stood smiling quizzically at Miss Perks.

"I say," he exclaimed, "you've roused the waters, haven't you, eh?"

"Do you know that creature?" asked Miss Perks coldly.

"Only too well. I'm staying at the King's Arms." Telford threw himself down beside the seat. "She's best in small doses."

"So I can well believe."

Telford plunged his nose into the close-cropped turf.

"It really does smell like dawn in Paradise."

"Kipling." Miss Perks nodded her head. "Well, there is no harm in a young man knowing Kipling. I had been given to understand that the young men of to-day despised Kipling and all his works."

"Your informant was a little out of date. Kipling is in again. He's been taken up with enthusiasm by the youth of Bloomsbury. Not to mention minor strongholds of intellectualism."

"I did not know. I regret to hear it. It is a sad fate for a great poet. I cannot imagine what Kipling has done to deserve it. I hope he is unaware of the fact. It would be no kindness to tell him."

"I say, you're pretty hot, aren't you?" said the young man with genuine admiration.

Miss Perks returned no answer to this compliment except to click her needles.

Presently the young man sprawling lazily at her

feet continued the conversation. "If I were that woman's husband, I'd poison her."

"Far better emigrate. It would be a pity to go to the gallows for the sake of a woman like Mrs. Charteris."

"In a case like that, poisoning ought not to be reckoned a crime. Mrs. Charteris's tongue should be sufficient defence."

"A woman's tongue!" exclaimed Miss Perks. "If that's to be taken as an excuse, half the husbands in England would go out to-morrow and buy weed-killer."

"I say," said Telford banteringly, "you are a one!"

"Still, from what I have seen of Mr. Charteris, he is not the sort of husband who would take extreme measures."

"Unfortunately, no. It's a pity. I drop him an occasional hint: have ventured even to proffer a suggestion. He turns a deaf ear. And in his position as a professional dispenser of drinks he has such excellent opportunities."

"What are you?" asked Miss Perks stiffly. "A professional inciter to murder?"

The young man laughed. "No. I write detective stories. At least, I am writing a detective story; or, to be exact, I am thinking of writing a detective story."

"If you have any talent, you will be better employed in putting it to a more respectable use."

"I gather you disapprove of detective stories."

"A form of fiction written by people with debased minds for people who do not know how to use their leisure."

"I can't say I agree with you," said the young man. "There is a great deal to be learned from the study of crime. One might almost say that the proper study of man is manslaughter. Detective stories help to open people's eyes. There is a great deal more murder going on than most of us suspect."

"I dislike people who talk simply for the sake of effect," said Miss Perks, clicking her needles.

"Oh, but really," protested the young man, "I do honestly believe what I say. More things are done by poison than this world dreams of. You heard of the death of the late Speakman, Helmstone councillor, builder of bungalows, enthusiastic supporter of the offending scheme for building a motor-racing track on these blessed hills? "

"What of it? "

"People are saying he was murdered."

"That's most interesting," said Miss Perks calmly.

"Who are saying it? "

"Oh, just people."

"Which people? "

"It is common talk."

"Where is this common talk to be heard? "

"Oh, in places where frank speech is exchanged between man and man."

"You mean pubs, I suppose? "

"Here, there and everywhere."

"This is most interesting," repeated Miss Perks. She dropped the pull-over and, putting her head on one side, looked fixedly at the young man sprawling at her feet. "People whom you decline to specify are saying in all sorts of vague places that the man Speakman was murdered. Do they also say who murdered him?"

"They don't mention any names."

"Or any method?"

"Poison, says the breath of scandal."

"Living in a little town, I know all about the breath of scandal. Naturally, in a village its effects would be even more deadly. I pay no attention to it as a rule, but this case happens to interest me. Does scandal attribute any particular motive to the murderer?"

"If you lived on the edge of these Downs," said the young man solemnly, "wouldn't you cheerfully murder any man who was in favour of dropping a motor-race track into the midst of them?"

"In theory, yes," admitted Miss Perks, with more than usual caution. "I should be all in favour of his murder, at any rate. Unfortunately, the sort of people who worry themselves about that sort of thing are not the sort of people who commit murders."

"There is something in what you say," said Telford. "I can't, for example, imagine Mr. Winstanley poisoning anyone, not even for such good cause as that. I quite see the difficulty. Still, there



are other motives besides respect for the amenities of the countryside. Jealousy, for example, the commonest motive for murder."

"Yes," said Miss Perks.

"Or the hope of gain."

"This is thin ice," said Miss Perks. "The Partridges may blast your young career by taking proceedings for slander. You had better pass on."

"There is also revenge."

"There is. Has anything been heard yet of that person Lovett?"

"He is still missing from his home with Mrs. Waddell. Naturally, he is a suspect. But he is not alone. Several other people have yet to clear their characters."

"I see," said Miss Perks. "You have shown pretty clearly that you have a most unpleasant mind, and I have no doubt that you are fully qualified to be a writer of successful detective stories. Are you proposing to go farther and assume the rôle of detective yourself?"

Telford laughed. "Lord, no. I am merely the amused observer."

"Then you should keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, or you may find yourself in trouble."

"I will take your advice to heart."

"Then you will be the exception. Advice is generally a drug. I only offer mine when there is a shortage of common sense on the market."

"You are very kind."

"Not at all. I am a calculating old woman, and kindness is the last thing that governs my actions."

"Oh, come!"

"Just now," said Miss Perks thoughtfully, "that Charteris woman called me a spiteful, interfering, impolite old cat."

"I say!" exclaimed Telford.

"She was perfectly right. I was pleased by her show of spirit: it was all the more welcome because it was the last thing I expected of her. And since," added Miss Perks, rising, "Mrs. Charteris has set the example of frankness, let me tell you, young man, that you are a mischievous busybody, a young fool capable of doing an immense amount of harm; and that the sooner you leave this place and go back to your particular Bloomsbury, where your juvenile conceit can do no harm, the better for everybody concerned."

With that Miss Perks turned her back on the young man in the blue pull-over and made her way with deliberation towards the road that led to the valley.

## 3

Telford, still chuckling from time to time at the thought of his encounter with Miss Perks, continued his stroll and came across Montgomery on the next spur of the hills.

"Any news of Lovett?"

"None at all."

"What do you make of it?"

"I am very much afraid some harm may have befallen him," said the organist, shaking his head. "He was in a strange state of mind when he left me to go to Helmstone. Although at the time I confess I did not notice the significance of the facts, I cannot help feeling that he was being deliberately reckless. He was within an inch of being run over by Doctor Prout's car, and then, again, he nearly fell over a precipitous slope when he was searching for a plant. I have tried to persuade Mrs. Waddell to go to the police, but she prefers to wait a little longer, no doubt because she feels that the possible publicity might reflect in some manner on her lodging-house."

"So that's how the *affaire* Lovett stands, is it?" They walked on in silence for a minute or two. "By the way, Montgomery," Telford continued abruptly, "do you happen to know anything about poisons?"

"Poisons? As it happens, I do: that is to say, I have a small amount of information on the subject, acquired, as it were, by accident. I went into the Helmstone Public Library to shelter from a thunderstorm and picked up the first volume that came to hand in the reference room. It happened to be a part of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and it was full of words beginning with P. It opened at the article on poisons, and I read on, and, having a naturally retentive memory, I remember most of it. But it is

not a congenial subject, and on a day like this it would surely be better, Telford, if we talked about something else. Shall we return to the sonnet?"

"I'm sick of sonnets. Poetry doesn't pay. I'm thinking of writing a detective story. As you know all about poisons, you can tell me something I want to know. The idea is to get rid of an unwanted person by poison, but at the same time make it look like natural causes."

"My knowledge does not extend as far as that, and if it did, I should be careful not to tell you. Though of course I trust you, Telford, I should consider such knowledge far too unsafe to be talked about."

"Perhaps you're right. I shall have to follow your example and mug up the subject in the Public Library. Interesting topic. There are all the weed-killer merchants and the Borgias and . . . What was it they gave old Socrates to drink?"

"Lovett could tell you all about that. It is his department. He would know all about the Poison Hemlock: quite a common weed, by the way. It grows by streams and ponds, and is frequently mistaken for parsley."

"Splendid. I suppose any book on poisons would give me a lot of hints about hemlock."

"You must look it up under conium: that, I believe, is the scientific name."

"You are a perfect authority. I think conium sounds the thing. Not too painful a death, is it, from what I remember of the last moments of

Socrates? I could drop some into the patient's barley-water."

"That might pass in a story," said Montgomery, "but in real life one would be pretty sure to detect the presence of foreign matter. You see, the peculiarity about conium is its characteristic mousey smell."

"I see. The patient would smell a rat."

"You could, of course, mix it with something which would disguise the mousey smell, but certainly barley-water alone would not succeed in that."

"I must try some of Mrs. Waddell's home-made wines of which I have heard great accounts. But there do seem to be snags about conium. Strychnine won't do either. It's the sort of thing they always find at the post mortem, and I don't want them to find anything at the post mortem: that's the whole point. How about something elementary, like an overdose of headache powder?"

"You could certainly poison a person by giving him or her an overdose of headache powders containing antifebrin, as they usually do. Still, I should not recommend the method. Cyanosis is always in evidence, as in the case of another poison at least as commonly found in households."

"You're most helpful, Montgomery. Keep it up. What is this other poison commonly found in households?"

"You really must excuse me, Telford, if I do not tell you; but, as I say, it would not serve

your purpose, since there would be such obvious cyanosis."

"What on earth is cyanosis?"

"Blue jaundice."

"And I suppose any fool of a doctor would spot blue jaundice?"

"He could hardly fail to notice such a state."

"Even a dim-eyed old dodderer like Prout?"

"It would be very remarkable if he didn't."

"It's very sad. Poisoning is not such a simple business as I had ventured to hope. You are ruling out everything, including headache powders and the other mysterious stuff commonly found in households. How about the stuff my uncle took in small doses for his heart . . . digitalis, I think it was called. Wouldn't it be perfectly easy to give a heart sufferer an overdose of digitalis?"

"Certainly you could, and it would kill him, but there is a quite unmistakable symptom, and any doctor would want to know why the patient had taken an overdose."

"I see. I shall have to commit my murder with a revolver or a knobby stick. It seems safer."

"I hope you won't mind what I am going to say, Telford, but I do think it would be a pity if you devoted your very considerable literary powers to the composition of detective stories. I know your literary powers are of a very high order. That sonnet you let me have the pleasure of reading was a remarkable piece of work. When you are capable of creating

things like that you owe a duty to the world. If you wished, you could turn the thoughts of your readers to all that is noble and good. Why encourage them to dwell on the sordid deeds of scoundrels and murderers? You will forgive me for speaking so frankly, Telford, but I feel very strongly on this subject."

"Oh, not at all," said Telford vaguely. "I'm sure you do it for the best. This is a jolly morning, anyhow. I say!"

"What is it?"

"Wouldn't it be extremely odd if it turned out that Speakman had been poisoned instead of dying from heart failure?"

Montgomery sighed. "You see now what comes from letting your mind dwell too much upon such unsavoury things. There is no justification whatever for supposing that Speakman's death was anything but a natural one. It is quite unnecessary and perhaps even dangerous to suggest that there is any other explanation. If I were you, Telford, I should be very careful in what I said about such things. There, now" . . . Montgomery smiled winningly . . . "you see that I am paying you the compliment of speaking my mind."

"I appreciate it," said Telford. "I know you will keep a confidence, and I am sure you will not let my possibly injudicious remarks go any further. Isn't it a jolly morning?"

"The funeral went off very well, Vicar," said Mr. Winstanley. "I am glad we had such a fine day for it. Standing about bareheaded in driving rain or a cold wind always makes such an occasion rather trying, and there is a good deal of truth in the saying that one funeral brings others. There was a large turn-out of villagers, and though their presence may have been prompted by morbid curiosity, I could not take any exception to their behaviour. Partridge conducted himself with decency, I was relieved to notice. It is so rarely that one sees him perfectly sober."

"He appears to be in a chastened frame of mind."

"Mrs. Partridge was not there."

"Very wisely, I think, my dear Winstanley. I am glad to say she has almost recovered from the shock. Oddly enough, the return of that deplorable husband of hers has given her just the stimulus she needed."

"Do you happen to know how . . . how things stand with them?" asked Mr. Winstanley delicately.

The Vicar understood perfectly.

"I believe Speakman has left everything to her, but from what the lawyer says it may be some little time before they know exactly how much it is. The councillor's affairs were very complex and will take some unravelling. We must hope for her sake that there is plenty and that she will use it wisely."

"It is a pity . . ."

"Yes, quite," said the Vicar. "Let us hope her



lawyer is a sensible man and will devise ways and means to prevent the fortune from being dissipated. And how is Miss Perks?"

"I believe our Downland air is doing her good, Vicar. She gets out a great deal. She is remarkable for her age. She is capable of far more exertion than I am, I regret to say. Indeed, I scarcely see her except at meal-times."

"The perfect guest," murmured the Vicar.

"She is a little terrifying: a person of very direct speech, almost brutally blunt at times." Mr. Winstanley shook his head. "Upon my soul, I feel sometimes like a schoolboy who is being cross-questioned about his misdemeanours. The precautions I am bound to take for the sake of my health . . . the care in diet so strongly recommended by Prout . . . seem a constant source of sardonic amusement to her. When at dinner I asked her what she would take to drink, and had to confess that the choice at my board lay as a rule between hot water and cold . . . well, I must admit to feeling almost hurt at the mockery with which she assailed me."

"A little chaff does us no harm, my dear Winstanley," said the Vicar, thinking that his friend would be none the worse for a great deal of it.

"She is not well affected to the Church, I regret to say," continued Mr. Winstanley. "With her own Rector in Chesworth it would appear, from her own account, that she lives in a perpetual state of feud."

"That's bad."

"And, by the way, Vicar, I have been meaning to ask you before. Will you come and dine with us to-morrow night? Just my aunt and myself."

The Vicar winced.

"Well, thank you, my dear Winstanley, it is very good of you. I will come prepared to stand fire."

"Mrs. Burwash called on the morning after I wrote to her," said Mr. Winstanley after a little pause, "and saw my aunt in my absence. It was most regrettable. I do not like that sort of thing to happen."

"I imagine Miss Perks is quite capable of taking care of herself."

"So she did not hesitate to tell me. She said Mrs. Burwash struck her as a very sensible woman, and they got on quite nicely. Mrs. Burwash had come to ask me for seven days' grace so that she could find a suitable house."

"There ought not to be any suitable houses."

"Exactly. That is precisely what I said to my aunt, and I regret to say my aunt only laughed. The woman offered to return my cheque: I had sent her a month's rent in lieu of a month's notice."

"You accepted the offer?"

"Certainly. I was glad to have it back, and it shall go to a suitable charity."

"There are some suitable charities," said the Vicar sadly.

## CHAPTER VI

### MISS PERKS AT THE PLOUGH

#### I

As Miss Perks walked slowly through the village after tea, grimly meditating a number of things, she heard the shouts of children at play, and, lifting her eyes, she saw the village boys amusing themselves by throwing stones at the ducks on the pond. Miss Perks clutched the silver-mounted ebony stick she had taken to carrying, and quickened her step, for it was her firm belief that boys should be kept in order. Short as the distance was, a transformation scene had been enacted by the time Miss Perks reached the spot. The mischievous laughter had given way to good-humoured merriment, the boys were clustered round a large red-faced man who was telling them stories, and the ducks were paddling about as placidly as if the young of the human race had never been invented.

“Quite an idyll,” thought Miss Perks acidly. “So this is the man Partridge.” She took a good look at him. “Yes,” she told herself, “that, I suppose, is exactly how an ex-officer would look some years after he had begun to woo the downward path.”

## MISS PERKS AT THE PLOUGH

She pursed up her lips and went on her methodical way. Two men overtook her, deep in conversation.

"Poison. That's what they're saying. Poison. Poison, they're saying."

"Yes, I have heard them talking about poison. They do say something about poison. Yes, I've heard them mention it."

"It's poison, they say. Poison."

"Yes, some people do say poison. I've heard them myself."

"What they're saying is it's poison. That's what they're saying it is."

It might have been mistaken for an argument if it had not been conducted in the most matter-of-fact tones. The conversationalists passed through the swing doors of the King's Arms. Miss Perks reflected upon (a) the almost overpowering intellectual atmosphere that must pervade those places where frank speech is exchanged between man and man, and (b) the mysterious process by which scandal grows and spreads.

These meditations accompanied her leisurely progress past the church and the Vicarage and half-way along a rising lane, where her thoughts were turned into another channel by the discovery of Rosemary Cottage. It was an engaging little house. The garden had been properly looked after, and there were flowers and trim curtains in the windows. Miss Perks thought almost kindly of Mrs. Burwash.

The lane wound steeply, and when a side-turning

offered itself which evidently led back to the village, Miss Perks accepted it with relief. Rising gradients now made her feel old.

"Old I am," she muttered, "and meddling in things that don't concern me, for no possible reason whatever. They say that old fools are the worst of fools, and obviously they are right. To-morrow I shall go to Helmstone for the day and divert my mind."

It was her fortune at this point to hear a male voice raised in fear and anger.

"You can go to hell," it shouted. "I don't want anything to do with you. You can prove nothing and you can do your damndest."

Miss Perks took the bend without haste, and saw Partridge, white with rage, shaking his fist at an elderly tramp who sat on the top of a five-barred gate, beating time with a heavy ash stick and apparently much amused by the situation.

Miss Perks halted and regarded Partridge with malicious eyes.

"Is there anything wrong?" she asked smoothly.

"Nothing to worry about," growled Partridge. "I am merely getting rid of this fellow. He's a beggar and inclined to make himself a nuisance. You go on. I'll attend to him."

"From the noise you were making, one might have supposed he was blackmailing you."

The tramp chuckled, and took off his battered hat with a great flourish.

"I salute it, madam," he said, "whenever I come across it. Feminine intuition! It is one of the greatest forces in the world, and I have a tremendous respect for it. As usual, it is unerring in the way it pierces directly to the truth. I have some information about this gentleman which I was hoping, am hoping, to capitalize. To such low shifts are the needy driven, more's the pity of it."

Partridge uttered threatening noises and made a step forward. The ash stick continued to conduct an imaginary orchestra.

"Little as one might guess," continued the tramp theatrically, "I am the secret agent of a foreign power. This gentleman has unfortunately committed some moral lapses and I hold him in my clutches, from which there is no escape. In the presence of a lady it is not meet for me to say more. I will merely add that unless the papers are handed over at the agreed spot a week from to-day, I shall tell all I know."

With this the tramp dropped lightly down on the other side of the gate and moved away across country, whistling a tune.

"I seem to have heard that tune before," said Miss Perks. "What is it?"

"Some pot-house song," muttered Partridge, now very red in the face.

"You are Mr. Partridge, I think," said Miss Perks gravely. "May I ask how Mrs. Partridge is?"

"She's not up to much," answered Partridge gloomily.

"I certainly have heard that tune before, and now I can remember when. Never mind. What a dreadful tramp! I am only a weak woman. When tramps are about I am nervous. Would you be so very kind as to see me back to the village?"

"Delighted." The voice lacked conviction.

"I hope you will report the matter to the police. A man like that should not be at large."

"I certainly shall." Again the tone lacked conviction.

"I trust your wife will soon be fully recovered. Councillor Speakman's death must have come as a great shock to her. You must look after her. Take care she doesn't hear the rumours that are going about in the village."

"What rumours?"

"Haven't you heard? Oh, well, perhaps I did wrong to mention them. I shouldn't pay any attention to them if I were you. They are probably just malicious gossip."

"But what are the rumours?"

"Really, I attach no importance to them. They are only interesting as showing the cheerful sort of outlook on life that village people have. They're saying that there must have been foul play."

"In connection with what?"

"Oh, naturally, your father-in-law's death. He died so suddenly."

There was silence for a moment. Then Partridge was heard protesting in a queer voice, "But surely it is in the natural course of things if a man dies suddenly when he has heart disease. Speakman died of heart disease. His own medical adviser was perfectly satisfied."

"The village people choose to think differently. As I said, I shouldn't bother about what the village people think. They are of a low order of intellect and naturally of a suspicious frame of mind."

"But what do they think?"

"They think the man Speakman was poisoned."

"Good God!" exclaimed Partridge. Then he laughed. "What preposterous nonsense! I think you have formed a very accurate idea of the intelligence of our local people."

"You're very cheerful about it," thought Miss Perks.

"Such a theory could easily be put to the test. There is such a thing as exhumation."

"There is," said Miss Perks. "A ghoulish business which I am sure the village people would thoroughly enjoy."

"Does the finger of suspicion point to the hand that administered the poison?" asked Partridge in sardonic tones.

"The village people have a modicum of common sense: or, I should rather say, a healthy fear of actions for damages. I should be surprised to hear that any name was being named. I imagine they



nod their heads and look knowing and leave one another to supply the blank with any suitable name that occurs to them."

"I see."

"You didn't poison him," said Miss Perks to herself. "The village people are on the wrong tack, which might have been expected. Their intellectual level is not high. No, I imagine it was that young cub I met on the hills who started this talk about poison. He'll come to a bad end. No, Mr. Partridge, you didn't poison him . . . or did you? I should like to know just exactly what took place between the two of you in the church. I have not the slightest doubt that that tramp could tell me if he wished."

Aloud she said, "Well, here we are back at the duck-pond. I mustn't trouble you any further. I see there are still some boys about, and I expect they would like you to play with them. It's very kind of you to see me back. You won't forget to report that tramp to the . . ."

But Partridge had stopped to greet Mrs. Partridge, who came towards them followed by her dog.

"Hullo, old thing! "

"Hullo, dear! "

"How are you feeling now?" asked Partridge solicitously.

Mrs. Partridge answered that she was feeling much better, and slanted her eyes towards Miss Perks, of whom she had evidently heard, and to whom she

wished to be introduced. Partridge having no option, the two were made known to each other.

"And this is your dog?" inquired Miss Perks, inspecting the gross retriever with a malevolent eye.

"This is Lady. Lady, come and be introduced. Love me, love my dog."

Miss Perks thought that Mrs. Partridge would probably be without a friend in the world if this condition were to be taken seriously, and by an effort she refrained from saying so.

"I was taking her out for a little exercise. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Partridge hesitated. The conversation bored him, but he doubted whether it was a good thing to leave Miss Perks alone with his wife. He decided to stand by. Miss Perks observed the decision.

"I am so glad to have met you," she said briskly to Mrs. Partridge, "and now I must be getting along, but I hope we shall meet again soon."

"I hope we shall," said Mrs. Partridge.

"We certainly shall," said Miss Perks to herself; and she promptly decided to postpone her visit to Helmstone and call on Mrs. Partridge next day.

## 2

"Good afternoon, madam," said Mrs. Waddell politely. "Mrs. Partridge has gone to the post office, but she said she was coming straight back. Won't you sit down and wait, if you don't mind

taking a seat in the kitchen? And may I offer you just a small glass of my dandelion wine?"

"Well . . ."

"I can see, madam, that you are willing to try anything once." Mrs. Waddell decanted some of the yellow liquid into a glass and handed it to Miss Perks who sipped it judiciously and with unaccustomed tactfulness expressed her approval of the flavour. "There, now," said Mrs. Waddell, "I do hope that won't have any ill effects."

"I have a fairly good head," said Miss Perks good-humouredly.

"I didn't mean it in that way, although there's more strength in home-made wines than many people imagine, and I once persuaded a confirmed teetotaler to taste some, and the way she behaved afterwards surprised everybody who knew her, and her husband, who was there, was so much ashamed of her he didn't know where to look, poor man, he being a chapel worker. No, what I meant was this, and I do hope you're not easily alarmed, because it would make some people quite nervous, but the last person to take any of that dandelion wine, not counting myself, was Councillor Speakman. He drank the glass I gave him, poor fellow, and went out and dropped dead in the church."

"Dear me," said Miss Perks. "That's most interesting. I'm afraid I'm a tough old sinner, and I doubt whether anything is likely to happen to me." She took another sip.

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Mrs. Waddell looked at her with respectful admiration.

"I can see you fear nothing and nobody, ma'am. Well, I must say I've had several goes from the same bottle myself, and have felt no ill effects, but, there you are, one man's meat is another man's poison, as Mrs. Partridge says, and what may do me no harm may upset other people."

"I hear you have lost one of your boarders," said Miss Perks, "and I hope the dandelion wine had nothing to do with that."

"Oh, Lovett . . . a yard of misery my husband calls him. It's very odd, now I come to think of it, that those two should go out from this kitchen within a few minutes of each other, and neither be seen alive again, though it's my belief that Lovett has only forgotten his address, that being the sort of person he is, and there's no need to worry about him, for he'll turn up again, though my husband says he hopes he won't, but I say I hope he will, if only to clear away the hundreds of bottles he has in his bedroom, all filled with herbal medicines of one sort and another. But it's not dandelion wine to blame for his disappearance, because he never had any, though oddly enough I took some up to his room for him just a little while before. He came and asked me for a glass, and I took him up a little of the dandelion while I was about it, telling him it would do him as much good as all his herbs, but I noticed afterwards he hadn't touched it. He came downstairs and stood

talking in the kitchen until Councillor Speakman called, and that made him go, for I have an idea they didn't love one another; and it was then that I gave the poor councillor a glass of the wine and took one myself. It was very odd how things happened on that afternoon. Lovett had been unsettled all day, writing letters and going out to post them."

"That suggests he intended to go away, and was putting his affairs in order," said Miss Perks.

"Well, perhaps so, though if you knew Lovett you wouldn't expect him to act like a reasonable being. If he had meant to go away he would have forgotten to, and if he went away it was because he didn't mean to: that's my opinion. He was that sort of person."

"I see," said Miss Perks thoughtfully. "Oh, well, it's not really any business of mine, and I shan't do any good, I expect, by meddling with it."

Mrs. Waddell looked at her inquiringly, failing to realize that this was a soliloquy which Miss Perks had not intended to be overheard.

At this moment Mrs. Partridge came striding up the garden path. Miss Perks greeted her and promptly asked whether she would care to walk.

"It would be a great kindness to an old woman who is longing for a little company of her own sex."

"As it happens," said Mrs. Partridge, "I was just coming back to take Lady out. I didn't take her to the post office because they make such a fuss there."

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"Excellent," said Miss Perks with insincerity. Lady was rooted out, unwilling, from the cushions of her basket, and they set off towards the open Downs.

"It's very kind of you to give me your company," said the old lady. "There are tramps about. I saw one yesterday and he was quite threatening. I dare say your husband told you about him."

"No, Jim didn't mention him. I don't think my husband would worry very much about tramps."

"No? Still, I do," said Miss Perks mendaciously. "That is why I'm so glad to have you with me."

"Union is strength."

"Quite," said Miss Perks. "I hope you won't think I am presuming on a very scanty acquaintance in calling on you. As a matter of fact, I have heard so much about you from one source and another that I feel we are almost old acquaintances. I suppose you know what village people are for gossip."

"Well, I don't know what you've heard about me," said Mrs. Partridge, "but I'm quite sure you've heard nothing good about my husband."

Miss Perks, for once, did not quite know what to say. She grunted.

"I expect they've told you they wonder why I put up with him."

"Why do you?" asked Miss Perks bluntly.

"He's my husband."

"That's a very old-fashioned reason."

"In some ways I'm an old-fashioned person."

"I see," said Miss Perks. "You are old-fashioned enough to consider your vows binding. But didn't your husband make promises at the altar too, and if he hasn't kept them . . ."

"Two wrongs don't make a right," said Mrs. Partridge.

"What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," retorted Miss Perks in kind. "If he's not behaving as he promised, it seems to me just plain common sense to seek a remedy. There are steps that can be taken to regain one's liberty."

"I couldn't divorce him. It's against my principles."

"What an extraordinary woman she is, and what a Nosey Parker I am," reflected Miss Perks. "I am like one of those dreadful old women who infest cheap boarding-houses and poke their snouts into everybody's affairs and stir up trouble. If this is the effect the air of the Downs has upon me, the sooner I go back to Chesworth the better." Then aloud: "You could get a separation order."

"What would happen to Jim if I did?"

"Does it really matter?"

"He's my husband."

"Yes, I gathered that," said Miss Perks testily. "You must forgive me, my dear," she went on in a more soothing voice, "but leaving him might be just the stimulus he wants to stir him out of the state he's got into. He's doing no good to himself or anybody else."

"A vow is a sacred thing. In the eyes of the Church it is only death can part us."

Miss Perks snorted.

Charteris passed them on his way back to the King's Arms. He raised his cap.

"Any news of Lovett, do you happen to know, Mrs. Partridge?"

"Mrs. Waddell has heard nothing."

"I was just wondering."

He went on. Miss Perks, glancing back, saw him staring after them. It seemed to her that he was eating Mrs. Partridge with his eyes.

"There's a man marriage has landed into a pretty mess," said Miss Perks.

"Yes, I've often wondered how he manages to put up with that wife of his," said Mrs. Partridge calmly.

Miss Perks snorted again.

"I observe that your husband is very great friends with the village children."

"You can't help noticing that, can you? It's a good sign, I always think. Children have a sort of instinct for all that's good in a man."

Miss Perks said nothing.

"Dogs are good judges too. I always think well of a person my dog takes to."

Miss Perks turned a baleful eye on the animal that waddled reluctantly after them. It was old and ungainly, its hair fell out, it slobbered, and, though Miss Perks did not propose to investigate the point, she was sure it had a disgusting smell. She wondered



how any rational person could be guided in her judgment of a man by the opinion of a beast like that. If it were on similar principles that she had chosen her husband, thought Miss Perks, it was not surprising that she had been disappointed. What an extraordinary woman Mrs. Partridge was! Yes, there was something frank and fetching about her, and she was a fine figure of a woman, and it was no wonder that the henpecked Charteris turned longing eyes upon her. Why shouldn't it be possible for some benevolent despot to redistribute married persons on more intelligent lines? If Miss Perks had power in such matters, she would certainly give Mrs. Partridge to Charteris, and leave Partridge Mrs. Charteris and her blessing.

It was an abrupt transition of thought that now caused Miss Perks to ask: "Do you know a Councillor Copplestone?"

"I have heard my husband speak of him." Mrs. Partridge's tone showed that the subject was distasteful.

"Oh, indeed," thought Miss Perks. "Shall I be a malicious old cat if I lead trumps? I probably shall, but here goes." To Mrs. Partridge she said, "I met your Vicar last night. He dined at my nephew's. He seems very much worried because somebody the other day played what he described as a common music-hall tune on the bells."

"I'm afraid that was Jim," acknowledged Mrs. Partridge without hesitation.

"Oh! He wasn't sure . . ."

"My father could never have done such a thing. He didn't know one note from another. It was a joke among Helmstone councillors that he once asked why some function or other shouldn't be concluded by the Boy Scouts playing *God Save the King* on their bugles. That will give you an idea of his musical equipment. Besides, that wasn't the sort of way he behaved. Jim is very different."

"Did your husband tell you what in the world possessed him to play a trick like that?"

"It was just his fun. He didn't mean any mischief. That tune was the only one he could think of. I hope the Vicar is not still taking it to heart."

"I shouldn't worry about it. It's not a hanging matter." At the mention of hanging Mrs. Partridge did not turn a hair, and Miss Perks deduced that her husband had not made a clean breast of all his troubles. "The Vicar merely said that he was not surprised to find the culprit keeping clear of the village for the rest of the day."

"He had to go over to Chesworth about a possible job, and he met an old friend who insisted on his staying for the night."

"I see. Well, I am enjoying this walk. It was very good of you to give me your company, though that dreadful tramp does not seem to be about to-day. He was very rude to your husband. I thought Mr. Partridge would have reported it to the police."

"I should think my husband is capable of protecting himself from tramps without police assistance," said Mrs. Partridge with a faint smile. "He said nothing about it to me. Do you think we might turn back now? Lady has had enough exercise for one afternoon. You think so, don't you, Lady, old thing?"

"By all means," said Miss Perks. "I like this turning. It takes us past Rosemary Cottage, a very pretty little house."

"I don't know it."

"I must point it out to you," said Miss Perks considerably.

But as they came round the first of the two bends made by the lane before it reached the cottage, they saw a disgraceful affair which distracted their attention. Two middle-aged red-faced men, their coats removed, were scrambling in a rough-and-tumble fight in the middle of the road, for all the world as if they were ill-conditioned schoolboys. One of them was Jim Partridge. Miss Perks thought she knew the identity of the other, but she could not be certain. These combatants, both out of condition, and one as much lacking in science as the other, were dancing about in circles, shouting words of abuse, and lunging out with wild blows that went wide of their target. The conflict was full of sound and fury, but no damage had been done. Suddenly Partridge saw his wife and caught the malevolent eye of Miss Perks. He stood as if petrified. His

opponent, with a whoop of joy, seized upon this momentary paralysis and landed a vicious right-hander in Partridge's right eye. It was not because of this blow, which in the surprise of the moment he scarcely noticed, but in obedience to the schoolboy instinct within him that Mr. Partridge snatched up his coat, vaulted a fence and set off hurriedly across the fields. His antagonist, swollen with triumph, was about to follow in pursuit when he in his turn became aware of an audience. He picked up his coat, stood for a moment indecisive, realized his shame, and bolted towards the village.

"That's a nice way to behave," said Miss Perks in the tone which she had once been accustomed to use to naughty little boys. "Who was the other man?"

"Councillor Copplestone," answered Mrs. Partridge with a frown. "I must tell Jim he's not to fight in the road." She added, "If we had not come round the turning at that moment he would never have let Councillor Copplestone hit him in the eye."

Miss Perks made no comment. They walked on in silence, to find Mrs. Burwash standing at her garden gate and looking anxiously up the lane.

"A beautiful afternoon, Mrs. Burwash," said Miss Perks cheerfully.

"Good afternoon, Miss Perks. I was just . . ." She looked askance at Mrs. Partridge and mounted that not unbecoming blush of hers. "I was just enjoying the air for a minute or two."

"The air is excellent," said Miss Perks. "It will do you good. This sort of weather does no harm to anybody. An afternoon like this is a boon and fills people with peaceful thoughts. Here and there schoolboys may quarrel, and one of them may give the other a blow in anger, but there's no great harm done. The grown-ups interfere, and one runs away to nurse a black eye, and the other flees in the opposite direction. Calm once more descends upon the world, and there is nothing left to worry about." Concluding this remarkable speech, Miss Perks slowly opened and closed her left eye, and wished Mrs. Burwash a brisk good afternoon.

"Good afternoon," said Mrs. Burwash, "and thank you, I'm sure." She turned and went rather doubtfully up her trim garden path. Mrs. Partridge eyed her curiously.

"Who was that?"

"Oh, just one of Mr. Winstanley's tenants. A pretty little house, don't you think? We shall be back in excellent time for tea."

## 3

Twenty-four hours later Mr. Winstanley said, "And how did you enjoy your visit to Helmstone?"

"I feel a year younger," announced Miss Perks. "The place has changed a great deal since I was there last, but the air is as bracing as ever it was."

"It's beyond the power of the Town Council to alter that," said her nephew pessimistically, "or no doubt they would have done so. The Helmstone air certainly has tonic qualities. I sometimes used to wonder whether it would not have been better from the point of view of health to have built my house a little nearer the sea, but of course if I had done so I should now be shut in by houses on all sides. What did you think of Helmstone itself?"

"Well," said Miss Perks, thoughtfully assembling her impressions, "if the whole of the front could be pulled down and re-erected by somebody with some notion of taste, and the piers blown up and replaced by stone jetties, and the town itself taken away or completely replanned, Helmstone would be a pleasant place to go to still, provided the tone of the amusement caterers and the shopkeepers could be raised, and visitors attracted of a very different class from those I saw there to-day."

"You are asking for miracles," said Mr. Winstanley.

"Nothing but a series of miracles would be of any service," said Miss Perks. "Or a large supply of dynamite."

"The assets of Helmstone," said her nephew dogmatically, "are its climate, its nearness to London, and the historical associations of which traces have not yet been rooted out by the Town Council. In other respects it is a fifth-rate resort. Now I suppose you are tired and wish to spend a quiet evening?"

"On the contrary, I shall go for a walk after tea."

Amazing vigour, thought Mr. Winstanley ruefully. Miss Perks had forgotten the qualms expressed by her doctor, it seemed. What a blessing it was to have been born with a sound constitution.

Miss Perks duly set out alone after tea, caring not a whit for possible encounters with tramps. She stumped sturdily along with her silver-mounted ebony cane, and her shrewd eyes scanned keenly the faces of all she met. Near the pond they fell upon the woebegone countenance of Mrs. Charteris. The innkeeper's wife drew her brows together and hurried past with bent head. Miss Perks, smiling grimly at the memory of their encounter on the hill, sat down on the seat by the pond to inspect the ducks. Perhaps after all, she admitted to herself, she was a little tired after her day in Helmstone. A few moments later she heard a well-remembered voice. Mrs. Charteris had turned back.

"May I sit down with you? You don't mind my sitting down with you, do you? Eh?"

"This is a public seat, I believe."

"You're cross with me," said Mrs. Charteris in her monotonous voice, sitting down at the extreme end of the seat. "I said things I ought not to have when I met you last time. I don't know why it is I say things I ought not to. Only, people often make me say them. I shouldn't say them if they didn't make me say them, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry I said them."

"My good woman," said Miss Perks, "you need not worry yourself about what you said to me. I cannot imagine that it can possibly matter."

"You are very sarcastic, you know. I suppose some people cannot help being sarcastic. There seems to be something about me that makes people inclined to be sarcastic. I am always sorry for them, because they can't have very nice minds or they wouldn't be sarcastic."

"That's very true," said Miss Perks, almost with enthusiasm. "They haven't very nice minds. I am quite aware that I am apt to be sarcastic myself, and I can assure you that I have by no means a nice mind. In fact, I have a most unpleasant mind."

Mrs. Charteris looked at her doubtfully. "You must make allowances. People don't make allowances. I don't know why they don't make allowances, but it's the last thing they seem to make. You see, I've not been at all well lately."

"You told me so. Indigestion."

"It's more than that. Much worse than that. The last day or two I have felt very ill indeed."

"What are the symptoms?"

Mrs. Charteris brightened a little. "I've been having fits of dizziness. Do you ever have fits of dizziness? It's not at all a nice thing to have fits of dizziness, I can tell you."

"You've been eating something that disagrees with you."

"I don't think so. No, it can't be that. I am



ever so careful about what I eat. I eat scarcely anything. The wonder is how I keep alive at all. Few people can eat less than I do."

"I find that most people who think they eat very little eat a great deal more than they think they do. However, you may be right. What have you been drinking?"

"I scarcely ever drink. For a publican's wife people say I'm a model of abstinence."

"Then people do say nice things about you sometimes."

"They say it in a nasty way, as if it were all wrong that I should be a publican's wife. They say it as if they were sorry for my husband. I expect that's what they mean, really. As for drink, I never touch anything except a little whisky at night. I do think I'm entitled to a little whisky at night."

"By all means, so long as you don't put anything in it that makes you feel dizzy." Miss Perks saw fit to change the conversation. "Well, what are they talking about most in the village now?"

"They're saying . . . You know the sort of thing people say . . ."

"Well, what is it they are saying?"

"They're saying . . . I ought not to sully my lips with it, but since you ask me, I will tell you. They're saying Councillor Speakman was poisoned."

"M'yes," said Miss Perks. "They're not saying that the man was poisoned at the King's Arms, I hope?"

"Good gracious, no. What a shocking thing to say! I do think you say shocking things sometimes. I don't think you can realize what shocking things you say."

"Was it shocking?" asked Miss Perks innocently. "Well, perhaps it was thoughtless. I simply asked myself where else in the village that man Speakman could have gone for a drink."

"Oh, lots of places. He might have had a drink when he went to Mrs. Waddell's."

"Where he went to see his daughter. The Partridges live there, and that man Lovett was there then. Is it suggested that they poisoned the man Speakman?"

"I've not heard anybody say anything about Mr. Lovett. No, nobody seems to think Mr. Lovett would poison anybody."

"Then it's between Partridge and Mrs. Partridge."

"I can't pretend to like Mrs. Partridge," said Mrs. Charteris, almost, as it were, in a confidential tone. "Few people can have less reason to like Mrs. Partridge than I have. Still . . ."

"I quite understand," said Miss Perks. "Though you have every reason to dislike Mrs. Partridge (I'm not asking you why), you don't think she's a poisoner. So it must be Partridge himself who administered the fatal dose."

"I didn't say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Charteris.

"No, my dear," said Miss Perks affectionately. "You didn't say so. Is that young man Telford still

staying with you at the King's Arms? He is? Well, has it occurred to you that he might have poisoned the man Speakman? "

Mrs. Charteris opened her eyes wide. "Gracious, no. Mr. Telford? You don't really think that Mr. Telford would poison anybody, do you? Eh? "

"He seems to me a young man capable of anything. He writes detective stories. I should advise you to keep a very careful eye on that young fellow. I should imagine he is far more likely to have poisoned the man Speakman than Partridge is. Partridge . . . But speak of the devil . . ."

Partridge had appeared on the scene with a troop of small boys in tow. Mrs. Charteris rose hastily.

"I don't want to meet Mr. Partridge when people are saying such things about him, though they may be only the sort of things that people do say. But I don't want to meet him and have to talk to him, especially when my husband . . ."

"Your husband? "

"Oh, never mind. I have forgotten what I was going to say. I must hurry back now, and I ought not to hurry, because of the fits of giddiness I get. People blame me for being late, but they don't realize that I have fits of giddiness. People never seem to show me any consideration at all. I don't know why it is. I really don't. Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Charteris. Remember what I said about that young fellow Telford, and do be careful about what you eat and drink."

Miss Perks remained for a minute or two watching Partridge playing with the boys, and then continued on her way.

## 4

Miss Perks observed with a sardonic eye how the rumour about the manner of Councillor Speakman's death fastened upon the village until it seemed that no one . . . always excepting Mr. Winstanley and the Vicar and Mrs. Partridge, who were outside the influence . . . could talk of anything else. She saw men trimming hedges pause and put their heads together; she saw milkmen in confabulation with cottage wives over the garden gate; she saw the postman stop and exchange words with a carter; she saw the whole population magically attracted into twos and threes and little groups by the force of scandal, just as particles of iron scattered over a magnetic field cannot help but fall into organized formations; and whenever Miss Perks saw this juxtaposition of whispering heads she fancied she saw also, enclosed in a sort of balloon blown from each mouth, as in the cruder sort of cartoon, the dreadful word, "Poison."

Although rumour often seems to spring of its own accord from the ground like the unhealthy emanations that hang over the marshes, infecting all who breathe the air, logic demands that it must originally have had a personal sponsor. In this instance Miss Perks was convinced that this personal sponsor wore

a blue pull-over tucked into flannel trousers and bore the name of Telford. The ancient schoolmistress in Miss Perks reflected grimly that if Telford had been some ten years younger it would have given her the greatest pleasure to pull down those trousers; but since corporal punishment was now out of the question, she had to restrain her itching hands. She would have chastised him to even more purpose with her tongue if he had not kept carefully out of her way. She told herself that she fully understood his motives. It amused him to see a community set by the ears. His observations would provide him with useful material for his projected novel. Well, perhaps retribution would eventually overtake Master Telford.

Miss Perks often asked herself at the time, still more often afterwards, why she had meddled in this business at all. The death of the man Speakman was no concern of hers. No one appeared to have lost by his exit, and there was a strong argument for letting things alone. If it had been merely a question of the man Speakman, she would, indeed, in all probability, have been satisfied to remain an ironical spectator of events. There were other things. There were several people in whose interrelated lives Miss Perks had begun to feel a detached scientific interest. She had also . . . she could not account for this . . . a presentiment that tragedy was astir. Though by no means a person given to idle imaginings, she could not rid herself of the feeling that

dreadful events were about to befall this little community.

Let it be added, to excuse Miss Perks's preoccupation with other people's affairs, that she had always been cursed with a relentless passion for arriving at the truth; and that she was on holiday and in danger of being bored. Her nephew was not an exciting host. Mr. Winstanley's head was too often in *The Times* or the *New Statesman*: or in the clouds. He had ideals. He was much attached to his native country, and especially to this little corner in which he had built his house under the chalk Downs. To Mr. Winstanley chalk was a mineral essentially English. He could not gainsay the fact that this same chalk which raised its head in interesting formations above his village cropped up again on the other side of the Channel, assuming much the same shapes; but when he saw it in France he could not help feeling that, like himself, it fitted uneasily into the landscape, and was wondering why it had ever been such a fool as to leave its proper country. When Mr. Winstanley, his inside deranged more than usual by the ridiculous efforts of foreign cooks, returned across the water, his heart leapt up when he beheld again the pallid cliffs of Dover, usually looming up like chilly sentinels through the damp mists surrounding Mr. Winstanley's island home. The railway line to which he gratefully transferred himself was pleasantly punctuated by the chalk cuttings through which it ran; and his spirits rose in propor-

tion as he drew nearer to the house he had built for himself in the heart of the best countryside of all, where they reached their maximum, although this, unfortunately, was no very elevated point, since Mr. Winstanley suffered from chronic dyspepsia.

To Mr. Winstanley, then, chalk was a symbol, the substructure of all that was greenest in England's green and pleasant land, a foundation upon which it would be readily possible to build something rather special in the way of New Jerusalems if only the rest of Mr. Winstanley's countrymen could be induced to a proper way of thinking. Since Mr. Winstanley's fellow countrymen showed for the most part no desire to think at all, and those who thought had the most reprehensible ideas . . . there was that dreadful proposal to build a motor track, for instance . . . Mr. Winstanley retired more and more into himself and brooded. Miss Perks had no patience with brooders.

So it came about that Miss Perks sought elsewhere for amusement.

"Having put my hand to the plough," she told herself, "I shall go on to the end of the furrow. I should do far better to tell Robert to send me a telegram asking me to return home at once, but there you are. Mattie, in your old age you are going crazy."

Her laugh was rather dreadful to hear.

## CHAPTER VII

### DEATH OF A DOG

#### I

MR. WINSTANLEY, putting down *The Times*, looked without enthusiasm at a card which had just been brought him by the maid.

"Councillor Copplestone? Who is he? Another Helmstone town councillor? I don't want to see any more Helmstone town councillors. What does he want to see me about? Why can't I be left in peace?"

The well-trained maid volunteered no answer to these questions.

"Oh, well," grumbled Mr. Winstanley, "I suppose I must see the rascal. Show the scoundrel in."

Councillor Copplestone, thus appearing in Mr. Winstanley's study at eleven the next morning, showed no traces of his fisticuffs with Partridge. He bore no scars, and, since his countenance was unprepossessing enough without them, this, as Miss Perks might have remarked, was just as well.

Mr. Winstanley, in whose prejudiced eyes all town



councillors were rascals . . . for it was well known that only persons with axes to grind took any interest in municipal elections, and these elected one another, and so what could you expect? . . . Mr. Winstanley rose as Copplestone came in but did not offer his hand. He glowered at his visitor and reluctantly waved him to a chair.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Copplestone?"

Copplestone produced a cigar case.

"Try one of these, sir. You'll find 'em worth trying."

"No, thank you. I never smoke cigars before lunch."

"You don't mind if I light up?"

"Oh, do."

Copplestone lit his cigar with care, leaving the band on (as Mr. Winstanley noticed), and, leaning back, scrutinized his host through cunning little eyes.

"I was here a couple of days ago. Funeral of my late colleague. I saw you there, sir. Poor Speakman. An able councillor. We shall miss him. I opposed some of his notions but respected the man."

"No doubt a very able man," admitted Mr. Winstanley. "Like you, I was opposed to some of his ideas: to one of them at least, for I understand he was strongly in favour of the scheme for a motor track on the Downs. I was prepared to fight that scandalous proposal tooth and nail."

"There were two opinions about that scheme," said Copplestone cautiously; and before Mr. Winstanley

could interrupt he was off on a new tack. "I dare say you were wondering why I wanted to see you. Sure you won't have a cigar? Good stuff. I got 'em cheap. Well, then, let's come to business. I hear you have a cottage to let in the village."

"As it happens, there will be one vacant in a few days' time. I must say, however, that I scarcely expected you to be aware of the fact."

"News gets round. It gets round, you know. Even before wireless was invented I believe it got round. Especially in country places." Copplestone guffawed: a coarse and unpleasant laugh, thought Mr. Winstanley. "This cottage of yours. Assuming a reasonable rent, I think I can put my hand on an excellent tenant."

"I am not sure," said Mr. Winstanley. The last thing he wished to do at that moment was to enter into business relations with Copplestone. An inspiration came to him, and he added, "No, I am not sure. I fancy I have other views about that cottage. I don't think it will be in the market. I may have a use for it."

"You're not, I hope . . . What I mean to say is, I can vouch for the perfect respectability of my client."

"Oh dear, no, Mr. Copplestone. I can assure you that such a consideration did not enter my mind at all. You must forgive me if I cannot entertain any proposals for Rosemary Cottage at present. The use to which it will be put depends upon the decision of

. . . of a third party. For the moment I can do nothing."

"Well, let me know later. If your idea falls through I may still be able to find you a tenant. Just drop me a line. Or give me a ring. Number's on my card."

"Thank you, Mr. Copplesstone," said Mr. Winstanley, and hoped the interview was over.

"So much for Rosemary Cottage," said Copplesstone, sitting on. "You have a nice little place here, sir."

"It suits me," acknowledged Mr. Winstanley.

"It's rather out-of-the-way."

"I like quiet."

"You were not thinking of selling, by any chance?"

"It has never entered my head. Well, it has entered my head. Very much against my will. If that scheme had gone through, and the motor track and the new road had made the place an . . . an uninhabitable Inferno, I might have been forced to consider the idea. Now that Councillor Speakman, poor fellow, is dead, I am trusting it will not go through."

Copplesstone coughed.

"I happen to be in touch with a party . . . not the same party . . . who is looking for a country house. I fancy this would suit him very well. He might be persuaded to make an offer. In fact, if he saw the place, I don't think he would hesitate. A

good offer, too. It's just the sort of place he's told me he's been looking for."

"I have no desire whatever to sell," said Mr. Winstanley stiffly.

"A very good offer. The party I have in mind is not the sort of party to haggle. A substantial man. Sets his heart on a thing, generally gets it. Spares no expense. The more I think of it" . . . Copplestone made a circular gesture with his cigar to indicate that he had taken into consideration all the amenities surrounding Mr. Winstanley . . . "the more I'm convinced of it. Just the place he wants. A firm offer. Not to be sneezed at in these hard times."

Mr. Winstanley felt so much like sneezing at it that he involuntarily took out his handkerchief.

"I have no wish to sell. That's final."

"Oh, well, if that's so . . ." Copplestone rose. "I don't wish to waste your time or mine." He examined an etching on the opposite wall. "Nice little thing, that." Without turning to face Mr. Winstanley he added, "You know, when the track is opened you may want to change your mind. It'll be too late."

"When the track is opened?"

"Quite." Copplestone swung round: there was a leer on his face. "You don't want to be left with an unsaleable proposition on your hands, you know."

"I thought you were acting in the interests of a client of yours?"

"Didn't I say so?"

"And you are suggesting that he should saddle himself with a property that may become unsaleable in a year or two's time! Is that how you look after the interests of your clients?"

Copplestone shrugged his shoulders.

"I must admit it's in my interest to encourage a sale. Usual commission. Matter of business. In any case the track is still, as you might say, in the air."

"I hope it will stay there." Mr. Winstanley rose and glanced at the portrait of his military ancestor. "And that's all I have to say to you, sir. I wish you good morning."

"But I should just like to . . ."

"Get out," said Mr. Winstanley, in a tone that surprised himself.

"Well, I must say that's a . . ."

"Get out," said Mr. Winstanley in a towering rage.

"Keep your temper, sir," urged Copplestone. "There's no need to get excited. I'm afraid you'll regret this later on. No, don't trouble. I can still give you a week to change your mind. Talk it over with a friend who understands business. Then write or give me a ring. But before the end of a week, remember. Good morning, sir."

Miss Perks came in a minute after Copplestone had gone. She found her nephew burning a visiting card, with attendant rites which suggested that he

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was conducting a sort of commination service, or the ceremonial purification of a violated sanctuary.

"I've just been losing my temper with a Helmstone councillor, aunt."

"Splendid. I'm delighted to hear it."

"A rascal called Copplestone."

"Indeed! How is he?"

"I should say he was in rude health. Why do you ask?"

"No contusions, bruises or swellings?"

"I noticed none. What an odd question to ask!"

"You're a justice of the peace, are you not?"

"I am, but, my dear aunt, what . . ."

"Well, tell me what he wanted."

"First he said he had a tenant for Rosemary Cottage, and then he knew someone who wanted to buy this house."

"Oh! Then he came about other matters."

"You speak in riddles," complained her nephew.

"Never mind that. What did you say to his proposals?"

"I declined them both. I told him I had another use for Rosemary Cottage, and the last thing I want to do is to give up this house."

"Even when they have built the track? The scheme is to be pushed through, you know," said Miss Perks calmly. "The man Speakman's colleagues are more in favour of it than ever. They feel it will be the best way of honouring his memory. As no doubt it will."

"An odd way of honouring any man's memory," said Mr. Winstanley. "You seem remarkably well informed, my dear aunt."

"I am," said Miss Perks with satisfaction. "I have made it my business to be. I did not altogether waste my time in Helmstone. You may rest assured that the track is going to be built."

"I shall not rest assured: I shall probably not rest at all." This was a cry from the heart of Miss Perks's nephew.

"In that man Speakman's lifetime," explained the old lady, "there was a certain amount of opposition to the scheme, and among the councillors Copplestone led it. He and the man Speakman were known to be bitter rivals. Now that the man Speakman's dead, the opposition has practically collapsed, so far as the councillors are concerned, and Copplestone has come out strongly in favour of it."

"But why? Why?"

"Copplestone and that man Speakman were great rivals, as I told you," said Miss Perks with a touch of impatience. "They were both in the contracting line, but Speakman could pull more strings than Copplestone."

"I still don't see why Speakman's death should make Copplestone change his mind about the motor track."

"Oh, Herbert," said his aunt sadly, "have you no comprehension at all of municipal politics?"

"You think Copplestone hopes that he will get the

contracts now that Speakman is out of the way?" asked Mr. Winstanley, seeing light.

"There's no need to state the matter so crudely," retorted Miss Perks with something like a grin.

Mr. Winstanley paced the carpet.

"So far as I can see," he exclaimed, stopping and looking at his aunt in bewilderment, "Councillor Speakman might just as well not have died at all!"

"That's one way of putting it." The old lady considered her nephew with her grimmest countenance. "Well, what are you going to do about this house?"

"Upon my soul, I don't know. What do you advise me to do?"

"Hold on for a better price."

"A better price!" Mr. Winstanley stared at his aunt.

"My dear Herbert," said Miss Perks indulgently, "I can see you are a child in business matters. If Coppleson calls again you had better call me into the conference. He wouldn't want to buy your house if he didn't think it was going up in value. Probably the idea is to turn the place into a country club or a road-house or whatever they call it nowadays. Cocktails and dancing and possibly a swimming-pool. Sit down, for goodness' sake, and don't stare at me like that. Try to get into your head that this village will be a sort of rendezvous and gathering-place of the clans when the track and the roads to it are in operation: the haunt of boys in plus fours and minxes with



plucked eyebrows. "You won't know the village in a couple of years' time."

"Upon my soul, I don't think I will."

"I don't think you will want to, even." Miss Perks turned to go. "I shall leave you to get these ideas into your head." She stopped at the door. "What was the other use you had in mind for Rosemary Cottage?"

"I'm afraid that's knocked on the head," said Mr. Winstanley miserably. "If they are going to build this wretched track after all, everything's knocked on the head. Had it not been for that, I was going to offer it to you and Uncle Robert."

"To me and Robert!" Miss Perks looked at him in surprise and amusement.

"My dear aunt, I am convinced that the climate of Chesworth, situated as it is in the middle of the Weald, is more relaxing than can be good for anyone. Think, too, of the clay subsoil. Clay holds the damp and must predispose to rheumatic affections. I have been delighted to notice that even a few days of the bracing air of our Downs has done you obvious good. I was intending to suggest that you and Robert should sell your house in the Pavement and come to live at Rosemary Cottage. You said you liked the look of that little house so much."

"You would find me an uncomfortable neighbour," said Miss Perks, with twinkling eyes. "Distance makes the heart grow fonder, as Mrs. Partridge would say."

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"I have frequently observed that relations do not necessarily see more of one another because they live at close quarters," remarked Mr. Winstanley with unconscious cynicism. "Still, the outlook being what it is, I cannot hope that you would dream of coming to live here. It will be fit for no one to live in shortly."

"You are very kind and you mustn't think I am ungrateful," said his aunt, "but if you really seriously expected that I should ever dream at my time of life of coming to live in the country, you must . . . you must think me a greater fool than even I think myself."

### 2

It was on the morning of the next day that Miss Perks saw the tramp again. He was sitting on the five-barred gate near Rosemary Cottage and he raised his battered black hat with a flourish as the old lady passed. It seemed to Miss Perks that he had the air of waiting for someone. "Well, it's a fine morning for blackmailing," she thought to herself; and, making up her mind suddenly to call on Mrs. Burwash, she turned in at the garden gate and tapped on the knockerless door.

Mrs. Burwash, surprised but gratified by the visit, invited the old lady into the parlour. It was a low-ceilinged room furnished appropriately in natural oak. Miss Perks found herself wondering whether

Mrs. Burwash had herself selected the furniture. She at least must have been responsible for the admirable neatness and cleanliness of everything.

"A charming room," said Miss Perks, taking a seat in a high-backed chair. "I hope your new house is at least as nice. Have you fixed up everything?"

"It is not quite settled yet. I expect to see the people again this afternoon. There may be a little difficulty about the rent. They are asking rather more than I care to pay. Circumstances . . ." Mrs. Burwash became silent.

"She was going to say," thought Miss Perks, "that circumstances had altered slightly; by which she probably intends an allusion to the death of the man Speakman, who has proved a loss to somebody after all."

"I see," said Miss Perks aloud. "Well, perhaps things will turn out all right. Do you keep a dog?"

Mrs. Burwash looked at her in surprise.

"A dog?"

"I said a dog. There is nothing remarkable in keeping a dog, unless it is a dog like Mrs. Partridge's. I can see no excuse for keeping a dog like Mrs. Partridge's. A senile valetudinarian of a dog is of no use to anybody. On the other hand, a robust, vigorous and watchful dog might conceivably be an asset to somebody who lives in a lonely cottage, as you do."

"No, I haven't a dog."

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"It would be advisable to keep a dog. There are tramps about. One in particular. Have you noticed him?"

"A tall ragged man with a big stick? Yes, I have seen him more than once. He has been about here so often that I was growing quite nervous. But he looks harmless enough. He smiles when I pass and he hasn't begged or worried me in any way."

"I want to see your garden," announced Miss Perks, rising abruptly.

Mrs. Burwash found herself a little disconcerted but she led the way courteously to the back of the house.

"There is not much of it," she said, indicating the half-acre of well-kept ground, "but I think it is rather nice and I shall be sorry to leave it. The apple trees gave a very good crop last year. I had so much fruit I scarcely knew what . . ."

Miss Perks, without making even a pretence of listening, had gone forward to the extreme left-hand corner, towards which the ground rose slightly.

"I thought so," she said with satisfaction.

Mrs. Burwash joined her and followed the direction of her keen eyes. They were the silent witnesses of a scene in pantomime. The tramp and Partridge constituted the cast. To the tramp, perched on the five-barred gate, Partridge approached: his steps were heavy and his face lowered. His personal appearance was not enhanced by a rich black eye. He poured out a long string of explanations or excuses to which

the tramp listened with growing impatience. The dialogue developed into an argument. Voices were raised to a pitch at which the sound of them, though not the sense, reached the ears of Miss Perks and Mrs. Burwash. Finally the tramp seemed to be delivering an ultimatum. He said things with great emphasis and shook his big ash stick. After some further pleading, to which the tramp obviously gave uncompromising answers, Partridge slunk wretchedly away. The tramp pulled out a black pipe, stuck it between his teeth unlit, and sank into gloomy rumination.

Miss Perks turned round to find that Mrs. Burwash had left her and was standing by one of the apple trees in the middle of the garden.

"An interesting scene," said Miss Perks. "You should have stayed to the end."

"I don't like eavesdropping." Mrs. Burwash produced that becoming little blush of hers.

"I, on the other hand," said Miss Perks cheerfully, "am quite the Nosey Parker, when I see any reason to be." She considered Mrs. Burwash thoughtfully. "You know," she added in a quiet tone, "I think . . . and for goodness' sake don't imagine I am being patronizing, because I was never more sincere . . . I think you are a very nice woman. Why . . ."

"What else is there?" returned Mrs. Burwash without emotion, fully understanding the import of the unspoken question. "Nothing I can do."

"Some people would think it a pity," remarked

Miss Perks, leaving it in doubt whether she agreed with some people or not.

"The Vicar . . ."

"Oh!" Miss Perks's tone was hostile. "He's been to see you, has he?"

"He wanted me to go into . . . Of course, the idea's absurd."

"What did you say to him?"

"I listened and promised to consider the idea."

"I should have told him what I thought of him for meddling in other people's business."

"The Vicar was very kind," said Mrs. Burwash sighing. "Of course it's difficult for anybody like him to understand . . . May I offer you . . ."

"No. No, thank you. I should like to stay a little longer but I have to be getting along," said Miss Perks briskly. She hesitated none the less. For the first time she found herself tempted to volunteer assistance to a comparative stranger. If only to spite the Vicar, she told herself in excuse. "You're an old fool, Mattie," she said suddenly. She went hastily away, and it was not until she had regained the lane that she realized she had spoken aloud.

"So that's why she looked at me so strangely," she meditated. "Oh, well . . . !" She quickened her pace. At the entrance to the village she overtook Partridge, just as Mrs. Charteris passed them going in the opposite direction.

"Well, Mr. Partridge," said Miss Perks, slowing

down in consonance with his dragging step, "and how is the world using you?" She turned her head and focussed a quite unabashed gaze on his black eye. "Dear me, you seem to have suffered some contusion."

"Yes, I had a slight argument with a fellow who was making himself obnoxious." Partridge dismissed the subject airily. Then, putting on a truculent tone, he added, "Was that Mrs. Charteris? I should like to have had a moment's speech with her. I should have given her a message to transmit to that idiot of a husband of hers."

"I may be seeing her later. Shall I pass it on?"

"It is a personal affair," said Partridge grandly. "I can conduct my own quarrels."

"Dear me. Have you quarrelled with Mr. Charteris? He strikes me as a most inoffensive little man."

"Inoffensive? Let me tell you, Miss Perks, he has had the sublime insolence to forbid me admission to his premises in future. He has sent me a note to that effect."

"Really! That is very interesting. Very interesting indeed. A queer thing! Innkeepers do not usually take so high a hand with their customers, surely?"

"No one but a swollen-headed Jack-in-office, unfit to serve swipes behind a counter, would give himself such ridiculous pretensions."

"There was a thing some time ago," said Miss

Perks thoughtfully, "called the Black List. They made a great fuss about it in the papers, I remember. The idea was to exclude notorious toppers from the public houses. They were photographed, I believe, and the local publicans were furnished with copies of the portraits. So far as I know the law is still on the statute book, but I understand that for practical purposes it is a dead letter. Perhaps Charteris feels that this is a good time to revive it."

"It is not that at all." Partridge spoke with offended dignity. "He is exceeding his rights. He is a licensed victualler and he is under an obligation to serve customers."

"Always provided they are not obviously already in a state of inebriation," suggested Miss Perks.

"We can take that for granted," said Partridge testily. "Provided they are sober, he has no option. I propose to take steps to convince him of his error."

"I shouldn't stoop to fisticuffs if I were you. You don't mind my saying so, I hope?" said Miss Perks with a glance at the black eye.

Partridge disregarded the innuendo. "I'll bring him to his senses. I'll oppose the renewal of his licence. I'll teach him what the law is."

"That's the proper spirit," said Miss Perks encouragingly. "Stand no nonsense and teach these would-be autocrats their place, but let all things be done decently and in order. I should suggest going to the police about it."



Partridge brooded over this suggestion without answering.

"What is his grievance against you?"

"God knows. Possibly the Vicar gave him the preposterous notion. He's hand and glove with the Vicar. The Church and the Trade, as is customary, are in close alliance in these country parts."

"Hand and glove with the Vicar, eh?" Miss Perks frowned, and reflected that Partridge was not too careful of the truth, and probably maligned the innkeeper of set purpose. "Let us sit down for a few minutes." The seat by the duck-pond was unoccupied. Partridge dumbly obeyed. Miss Perks looked at the ducks and then lifted her eyes to the blue-shadowed Downs beyond the village. "Very beautiful here, isn't it? And very quiet, though all that will be changed when that scheme your late father-in-law was so strongly in favour of comes to pass. Has it ever struck you that the refining influence of beautiful surroundings must be grossly over-rated? Golf courses, for instance, and race courses, as well as motor-racing tracks, are habitually located amid the prettiest scenery available, and yet if one were in search of refined company and cultured conversation one would scarcely look for it among golfers and racing men and motorists. . . . You seem to be very busy with your private thoughts. Here am I gallantly making small talk, and you are not helping me at all."

"I have a great deal on my mind."

"I have no doubt."

Partridge scowled at the sky. "It's a hell of a world," he said.

"That's exactly what my parrot at home in Chesworth is accustomed to say. It's one of his stock remarks."

"You keep him in a cage, I suppose?"

"Naturally. Why do you ask? Oh, I see. I was being more than usually dense. You are drawing a parallel."

"Oh, hell," said Partridge.

"I am sorry for you," Miss Perks permitted herself to remark gently.

"You? You don't understand."

"I think I do. You are being pestered by a tramp. The tramp knows something he thinks is to your disadvantage. I deduce that he was in the church on a certain occasion."

Partridge gripped the seat and stared hard at her.

"It's a habit tramps have, isn't it?" asked Miss Perks innocently. "They go into open churches on the chance of finding some coppers in the offertory box. While there they naturally exercise caution. So sometimes they see without being seen. Angry interviews, for instance."

"You seem to know all about it," said Partridge, moving uneasily.

"I don't, nor is there the slightest reason why you should tell me. If I were you, however, I should tell somebody, if only for the sake of relieving my mind."

"I think I will," said Partridge, after a moment's reflection. "After all, why shouldn't I? I'm an innocent person. I feel I must tell someone, and I can't very well tell my wife. Do you mind if I tell you? Some people might think you were not a very sympathetic person to talk to, but if I shall have to undergo cross-examination by a brow-beating lawyer, as seems quite possible, I may as well get some useful practice first."

"Why people bully me like this I really don't know," complained Miss Perks with twinkling eyes. "First there's Mrs. Charteris, of all people, and now there's you. Still, if you have really made up your mind to tell me, do go on."

"Shall I tell you the whole story from the beginning, or shall I just tell you what seems to me is important?"

"I leave it to you to tell me in your own way," said Miss Perks cheerfully. "I expect it will come to the same thing in the end. It's like ordering coal in Chesworth. Sometimes I ask for Derby Brights and sometimes for Silkstone, but whatever I order it all looks alike when it comes."

"Well," said Partridge, resuming impatiently, "I had been away for a day or two, and had just come back and was sitting in the saloon bar of the King's Arms that afternoon when Speakman came in. I wanted to speak to him, because . . . Well, to be quite frank, I wanted a temporary accommodation. We were very hard pressed at the time, as we still are,

and I thought that a man in a public position like his would not wish to see his daughter starving. So, although at our last meeting he had said words I found it difficult to forgive, I was prepared to humble my pride and go up to him. But there were other people in the bar and I thought it advisable to wait until I could see him alone. I went out and . . . I must admit to having had a few drinks that day, for I quite realize that my subsequent conduct is a little difficult to explain. While waiting about I dropped into the church and the arrangement the Vicar uses to play tunes on the bells caught my eye, and I had to experiment on it. I played . . . I needn't tell you the name of it. It was a music-hall chorus. I know it wasn't a suitable tune, but it happened to be the only one I knew how to play. You see, it's made up of four notes, and so it's easy. I played it through several times, and then someone came in at the church door, and I stopped suddenly, just as . . . I suppose, to be completely candid, I felt like a school-boy who had been caught in some mischief. I expected to see the Vicar, but it was my father-in-law. I felt this was a heaven-sent opportunity, and I at once asked him for a temporary loan. I said I must have money. I was very urgent."

"What did the man Speakman say?"

"Nothing. He looked at me with what I took to be an expression of fear."

"And you repeated your request and were very emphatic about it?"

"Yes. I dare say I shouted. The tramp heard me. He may have sneaked in for a snooze or possibly to rob the offertory box: it doesn't matter. The point is that he heard me demanding money with menaces, or at any rate in what sounded like a threatening manner, and when it comes to the trial his evidence may make things very unpleasant for me."

"The trial?"

"I suppose they can charge me with manslaughter," said Partridge miserably.

"What exactly happened?"

"As I said, Speakman merely looked at me. I lost patience and . . . and I believe I told him that if he didn't give me money I shouldn't be responsible for what might happen. He still said nothing, and merely looked at me in a stupid way. I laid my hand on his shoulder . . . that's all I did, I'll swear it . . ."

"Yes," said Miss Perks. "Go on."

"And he sank all of a sudden in a heap against the wall. He simply lay all huddled up and breathing heavily. I bent over him and he just managed to gasp out, 'They've poisoned me,' and . . ."

"Aha!" said Miss Perks.

"Yes." Partridge looked at her miserably. "When you mentioned poison the last time we met I was scared. I tried to bluff it off. I don't know how you . . ."

"Never mind. Go on."

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"Well, I was scared and I didn't know what to do. At first I thought of running to the Arms for help, and I went half-way down the path with that idea in mind. Then it occurred to me that he might be actually dying at that moment, and I went back, thinking I ought to do something at once: get him water, for instance. I thought there might be some water in the font, or possibly there was a tap in the vestry: it seemed to me I had better try to find some somewhere. When I went inside the porch again the heavy breathing had stopped. I laid my hand over his heart and could feel no pulse."

"How long had you left him? Just long enough to go half-way down the path and come back again?"

"Well, I might have been longer. I don't know. Anyhow, when I came back he was dead. I behaved very foolishly."

"You mean you ran away?"

"You can put it like that if you want to. . . . It's easy enough to take a sensible view of it now, but at that time I was in no condition to do so. Here was Speakman dead, and I was conscious of having laid hands upon him . . . though I swear I did no more than grip him by the shoulder. But when you remember that we were supposed to be at daggers drawn . . . Well, instead of summoning others, I slipped out of the church, cleared away from the village, got on to a bus, and spent the night in Chesworth. Coming back next morning . . ."

"Why did you come back so soon?" asked Miss

Perks, and added, "I think I can guess. You saw a report of that man Speakman's death, and the paper said it was heart disease, and there was no need to hold an inquest. You must have felt very much relieved . . . for the moment."

"Yes . . . and then, coming back to the village, I fell in with this tramp. He gave me to understand that he had been in the church all the time and hinted that he only had to go to the police to have me arrested on a charge of murder. I foolishly gave him half a crown to go away and . . ."

"And naturally he's been dunning you for more ever since. What fools some grown-up men can be! Obviously he thinks you an easy prey, and now that you have presumably come into thousands by the death of that man Speakman, he looks upon you as a sponge to be squeezed for the rest of his days."

"We don't know yet whether we stand to gain a penny by Speakman's death," said Partridge gloomily.

"That's very sad," said Miss Perks, "especially as it does not improve your position in the eyes of the law, for you must be supposed to have assumed that your father-in-law was rich beyond a doubt."

"Then you think they could make out a case against me?"

Miss Perks shrugged her shoulders.

"It's your word against the tramp's. There's no knowing what he may say. The question is which of you will be believed."

"Surely . . ." Partridge let his incipient protest die unspoken, and Miss Perks smiled at her own thoughts.

"What I can't understand is," she said, "how the people who are saying that Speakman was poisoned manage for once, apparently, to be right. There's a young gentleman I know who shot an arrow into the air and, if I'm not mistaken, will be as surprised as everybody else to find it sticking in the bull's-eye. How easy it is to make everybody say the same thing!"

"I don't quite . . ."

"All you have to do," pursued Miss Perks, paying no attention, "when you want people to think a certain thing, is to tell them what to think. Since the great majority never think at all unless they are told what to think, the person who knows how to tell them what to think is in a very strong position. That is why we so often find that societies and committees . . . and, for that matter, I suppose, governments . . . are simply expressions of the will of their strongest member. . . . However, I am very much afraid my philosophical speculations are of no immediate interest to you. I take it you want impartial advice on your best course of action."

"What on earth am I to do?" asked Partridge helplessly.

"Report that tramp to the police and charge him with obtaining money by threats. Tell one or two people you are taking proceedings against scandal-



mongers. You need only tell one or two. Choose 'em at random: they'll spread the news."

"That's no good. The police will want to know everything and I should find myself in the dock."

"If I charged six and eightpence for my advice," retorted Miss Perks, "there might be some hope of people taking it. What, may I ask, do you propose to do?"

"Go away somewhere until things have quietened down."

"Leaving your wife to face the music?"

Partridge was silent.

"What is she to do when the tramp applies to her . . . as I imagine he will do in your absence?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"She, being in possession of her senses, I hope, goes to the police. The police hear the story and say: Where is this man Partridge? Behold, he has fled. What conclusions do they draw?"

"Let 'em draw what conclusions they like," said Partridge sulkily. "I'm going away. I can't stand this sort of thing any longer. But I shall tell Mary I'm going to Eastbourne and so there won't be any secret about it."

"And are you going to Eastbourne?"

"Yes. There's a man at Eastbourne I think I might . . . get a job from."

"H'm," said Miss Perks. "What were you and Copplestone squabbling about?"

"I knew I should be cross-examined," declared

Partridge. "I shan't answer that question. You seem to get to know about everything. If you hadn't come up at that moment Copplestone would never have given me a black eye." He spoke like an injured schoolboy, thought Miss Perks.

"Well," she said, "it seems to me highly prejudicial to a certain hard-working woman that you should discuss your differences so close to her house."

Partridge opened his mouth to say something, but some remaining trace of a decent upbringing stopped him in time.

"I suppose," murmured Miss Perks, "Copplestone does at least pay as he goes. All things considered, you might be more thoughtful."

Partridge turned his neck uneasily under the stress of a feeling to which he had long been a stranger: he was much embarrassed.

"I have always had a silly weakness for black sheep," said Miss Perks, apparently apropos of nothing. "It comes no doubt of having instructed so many young children. Black sheep have a good deal in common with children. When they think they have been unjustly treated they try to level things up by causing mischief in some other quarter."

"Go on," said Partridge.

"I am going on," said Miss Perks. "I'm going to say that if it were not for my silly weakness for black sheep, I should tell you exactly what I thought of you. I should describe you as a weak-willed, selfish sponger, sodden with drink and swollen with self-

importance: a ne'er-do-weel, a worthless wastrel. My brother Robert would call you a bad egg."

"Thank you. I suppose you will also say that you don't believe a word of my story and that you think I murdered my father-in-law."

Miss Perks smiled.

"On the contrary, I believe a great deal of your story and I don't in the least think you murdered your father-in-law."

"That's something, anyhow."

"I think you are quite incapable of murdering anybody. To use a colloquialism, James Partridge . . . another of my brother's expressions . . . you simply haven't got the guts."

"Thank you."

"Manslaughter, of course," said Miss Perks amiably, "is quite another matter. In a moment of peevishness you would be quite capable of that."

"Yes, I go about killing people in silly fits of childish petulance. At the moment I feel very much like killing you."

"There is something about you, James Partridge . . . but I mustn't be rude."

"No, you mustn't begin to be rude."

"Don't interrupt. I was going on to say that you are a burden to society and an Old Man of the Sea to your wife. If she had treated you as you deserved she would have got rid of you long ago. She says her religious principles forbid the thought of divorce. I fear there is also the obstacle that she is still fond

of you. God alone knows why, James Partridge. But women are fools in that way. It is the one point on which they are bigger fools than men."

Partridge opened his mouth to speak but Miss Perks went ruthlessly on.

"The best thing you can possibly do, James Partridge, is to emigrate to some remote part of the world and try to live down the past. Since you haven't enough . . . I shall not use that vulgar word again . . . since you haven't the moral courage to do that, I can only recommend you, for the sake of everybody concerned . . ."

"To put my head in a gas-oven or tumble off a cliff?" inquired Partridge meekly.

"Those are suggestions to be considered."

"Thanks. As a matter of fact, I am going to Eastbourne. There is only one thing that stands in my way. . . ."

"Well, James Partridge, it is no use applying to me for journey money, but no doubt there are several people who would be willing to lend you money on the strict understanding that you go away and forget to come back."

"Oh, there are, are there? Who, for instance?"

"You might try Mr. Charteris," said Miss Perks maliciously.

"You can go to blazes," said Partridge. "I don't know why I ever permitted you to interfere in my private affairs."

He stalked off scowling. Miss Perks, watching him

go, sighed. She knew very well where he would raise the money for his journey. He would borrow it from Mrs. Burwash.

## 3

Within a few yards of the King's Arms, Miss Perks encountered Mrs. Partridge, followed a few yards behind by the disagreeable retriever.

"Good morning," called Mrs. Partridge.

"Good morning," said Miss Perks; and she glanced first at Mrs. Partridge and then at the King's Arms, uttered a sharp cry of pain, put her hand to her heart, and staggered.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Partridge solicitously. "Are you not well?"

Miss Perks groaned.

"Can I do anything? Is it . . . your heart?"

"It's nothing much," gasped Miss Perks. "Comes on sometimes. Passes soon. Brandy. Brandy."

Mrs. Partridge looked round at Charteris's establishment, bit her lip, and said, "I'll fetch you some if you like."

"I'd better sit down," said Miss Perks. "Give me your arm. We can get some there."

Mrs. Partridge offered the required support, and Miss Perks, not without pain, it seemed, was successfully piloted into the saloon bar, where she sank into a chair placed beneath a glass-cased trout. The room was empty. Miss Perks, through half-closed eyes,

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took stock. She had never been in a public house before: a schoolmistress's life has its deprivations. The King's Arms was a pretty good specimen of its kind, and Miss Perks found little to cavil at except the smell of stale beer and stale tobacco: if one could tolerate such an atmosphere, she supposed, one could make oneself comfortable in such a place. At any rate it was a great deal more pleasant than many homes are on wet washing-days.

Miss Perks observed with interest that her friend appeared to be thoroughly conversant with the manners and customs of licensed premises. Mrs. Partridge, seeing no one behind the bar, rapped on the counter. Charteris entered in his shirt-sleeves. He beamed.

"Lovely morning, Mrs. Partridge," he said with great cordiality. "I don't often have the pleasure of seeing you so early in the day."

Miss Perks, watching events very closely, felt something settle on her shoes. She gave a vicious little kick and the dog Lady, assuming a resentful expression, removed itself to a safe distance and then prowled about the floor, savouring the assorted smells, until its nose led it under the counter and so in the direction of the back premises.

"Brandy," Mrs. Partridge was saying curtly. "My friend is not well."

"Oh, dear," exclaimed the innkeeper. He took one look at Miss Perks, seated with bowed head under the stuffed trout, and poured out a small

quantity of the expensive liquor. Mrs. Partridge carried the precious offering carefully across to the invalid and held the glass to her lips. Miss Perks took a sip and sat up with a grateful smile.

"I shall feel better shortly," she said. "I just want to be left alone for a minute or two. Put the glass on the little table."

Mrs. Partridge murmured words of encouragement. She went back to the counter and engaged in conversation with Charteris. They both spoke in low tones, but Miss Perks's sense of hearing was exceptionally acute.

"I think she'll be all right."

"That's splendid."

It seemed to Miss Perks that the innkeeper's solicitude erred in its sense of direction. It should have been focussed upon the poor old lady who had had a heart attack. Instead, it overflowed upon Mrs. Partridge. (A fine upstanding woman! One could imagine her holding her own in a bar crowded with men.)

"The brandy will do her good."

"Yes. Won't you take something?"

"No, thank you."

"Have a little brandy yourself. You must have been upset by your friend's illness."

"No, thank you. I only came in because Miss Perks needed the brandy."

Mrs. Partridge was being cold, observed Miss Perks. Charteris was noticeably ill at ease, fumbling

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with his bottles and glasses, yet unable to keep his eyes from Mrs. Partridge's face.

"I . . . I wrote to Mr. Partridge yesterday," he said uncomfortably.

"I saw the letter."

"I thought it was perhaps for the best." His eyes pleaded. "For the sake of all concerned."

"It is perfectly ridiculous," answered Mrs. Partridge scornfully. "I am not defending Jim. I know he drinks too much. But you have no right to do a thing like that, and you know it."

"I am sorry. I . . . honestly, I thought it might help you."

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I am quite capable of looking after my own concerns." Mrs. Partridge was very angry. "It is a very silly thing to have done. I should never have come inside this house again if I had not been obliged to."

"I can only say I am humbly sorry. I will apologize to Mr. Partridge if you like. The letter was written on the impulse of the moment. I see now it was a great mistake."

"Oh, well." Mrs. Partridge's kind heart was touched by the obvious distress of the man behind the counter. "I have said what I thought about it. Let us say no more about the matter. Least said, soonest mended."

"That's very good of you." The earnest inn-keeper's eyes beamed behind his gold-rimmed



spectacles. (The man did not look like a publican at all, Miss Perks told herself, being well aware, in spite of her lack of first-hand experience, what an innkeeper ought to look like. He might have been a Sunday school teacher or a village shopkeeper: anything but a publican.)

"It's all right," said Mrs. Partridge in an off-hand manner.

"You are sure you won't . . . Can't I offer you a little . . ." (Not the innkeeper at all, but the courteous host pressing refreshment on a guest he was anxious to please. Miss Perks grunted, and took another sip of brandy.)

"Nothing, thank you."

Charteris sighed and passed his hand over his brow.

"You are not looking very well yourself, Mr. Charteris."

"Oh, but I am, perfectly well in myself, thank you. I have a good many troubles, though. I find myself much worried at times."

"You should not let yourself be worried. Care killed the cat. But of course," added Mrs. Partridge, "it is easy to tell people not to worry. Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. I'm sorry for everybody who is troubled in mind."

("Now you're being foolish," Miss Perks murmured to herself. "He's in a mood when he mistakes casual kindness for something else. Can't you see the sheep's eyes the man is casting at you? I

must take you away, my child. . . . But here is a diversion.")

The diversion was the arrival behind the counter of Mrs. Charteris.

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Partridge. I never expected to find you here. I never expect to find anybody here at this time of the morning. We never do any business at this time of the morning as a rule, and I can't say it's surprising, because it's a time of the morning when most people have better things to do."

"Miss Perks felt ill, my dear," put in her husband meekly, "and Mrs. Partridge was kind enough to bring her in and give her a little brandy."

"Very kind of her, I'm sure. I'm sure Mrs. Partridge is very kind. Too kind. It's nice when people are kind to one. I'm sure it must be nice when people are kind to one. I came in to tell you you are wanted at the back of the house, Jack. There's somebody from the brewers wants to speak to you. You can leave me in charge here, though I know you don't like leaving me in charge here. But I'm quite capable of attending to all the business we are likely to have at this time of the morning."

"Very well, my dear." Charteris went away humbly enough, but he paused for a moment, and, thought Miss Perks, it was just as well his wife did not see the expression in his eyes when he took that last look at Mrs. Partridge, or, poor thing as Mrs.

Charteris was, she might have committed murder at that moment.

The innkeeper's wife raised the flap of the counter and, turning her back rather ostentatiously upon Mrs. Partridge, came over to inquire how Miss Perks found herself.

"Thank you," said Miss Perks, rising, "I am fully restored, and I must be going, with many thanks for all this kindness."

She took out her purse and paid for the brandy, and, followed by a spate of rambling words directed entirely towards her, went out with Mrs. Partridge.

Mrs. Partridge stopped before they had gone twenty yards.

"Where's Lady?" she demanded.

"I imagine she found herself bored by our friend Mrs. Charteris's conversation," said Miss Perks brutally, "and decided to go home."

"She does go home of her own accord sometimes," admitted Mrs. Partridge. Nevertheless she looked about her and called and whistled for some time. Miss Perks, growing impatient, begged her friend, with many thanks for her attentions, not to feel herself detained any longer, as the indisposition was now quite over and forgotten. Mrs. Partridge needed reassurance on this point, but, having obtained it, gladly accepted her release, and hurried back to her lodgings to see whether Lady had safely returned.

It was Montgomery who, some hours later, found the dog. He was on his way to Mrs. Waddell's boarding-house when his roving eye caught sight of the unhappy retriever lying dead under a hedge. Evidently Mrs. Partridge's dog had been overtaken by a cruel end when trying to make its way home. Montgomery, like everyone else in the village, knew Lady by sight. He hesitated, and then, in his humanity, gathered up handfuls of leaves and decently covered the corpse.

There was a car standing outside Mrs. Waddell's house.

"Mrs. Partridge," explained the landlady, "has a visitor, a lawyer from Helmstone, and they're talking business in the sitting-room, and I only hope for her sake as well as mine, that it's good news he's brought her, though you never know, and once you're in the hands of the lawyers, I always say, you're lucky if you get away with what you have, even if that's nothing at all, as I'm afraid it is in the case of poor Mrs. Partridge."

"I must say I cannot help feeling relieved that she is unable to see me, because I have to tell her something which will cause her a great deal of distress," said Montgomery. "I shall ask you to break the news to her. You will do it better than a clumsy male person."

"What, is her dog dead?" exclaimed Mrs.

Waddell at once. "There, now. She has been in such a way about that blessed dog since it didn't come back this morning, and now . . ."

"I found it under a hedge."

"Run over by a motor-car? That dog was so old and slow it should never have been allowed to be out by itself, that is, if anybody wanted to keep it, and I'm quite sure I shouldn't, for . . ."

"There were no signs of an accident," said Montgomery. "It looked to me as if the animal had been poisoned."

At the word "poisoned," the landlady's powers of speech deserted her. She looked with blank face at Montgomery, and then mechanically moved to the dresser and poured out two glasses of dandelion wine.

"A little stimulant will do us no harm," she said.

"Not for me, Mrs. Waddell, thank you. I never take anything but beer. I am sure you will break the news kindly to Mrs. Partridge. For myself I cannot help feeling that the creature's death was a merciful release, for it was long past its days of usefulness."

"I agree with you, Mr. Montgomery," said Mrs. Waddell, putting down her glass. "Truer words were never spoken. Many a time my husband has said to me, 'Such a broken-down, slobbering, stinking relic of a dog I never saw, and I'm going to give it a little rat poison,' and I said, 'Not you, you don't,' for there's no accounting for tastes, and Mrs. Partridge thinks more of that brute than anything else

in the world. There's a good few would willingly have poisoned that Lady, and now it seems as if somebody has done it at last, and I'm not surprised, but I will say I don't like the notion of having to tell Mrs. Partridge, for she'll be cut up about it, poor soul. I think she would almost sooner have lost her husband."

Montgomery made no comment upon this, but thanked Mrs. Waddell for promising to inform Mrs. Partridge, and said he knew she would do it with the greatest delicacy and consideration possible. Further he indicated where the dead dog could be found, so that if Mrs. Partridge wished to give it decent burial, as no doubt she did, she would be able to make the necessary arrangements.

"And now," he went on, "I come to the matter which brought me here in the first instance. It is about Mr. Lovett, Mrs. Waddell."

"Why," exclaimed the landlady, "I had a letter from Lovett only this morning, and I can't make head or tail of it."

"I also had a letter from Lovett this morning, and it is utterly incomprehensible to me. It seems to be intended for you, and so I brought it along."

"That's Lovett all over," said Mrs. Waddell, a light breaking upon her, "he's that forgetful he's put the letters in the wrong envelopes. He wrote to me and posted it to you, and wrote to you and posted it to me. That's exactly what he would do."

She took down a letter from the mantelpiece. A

## THE SHADOW ON THE DOWNS

comparison of notes followed, and it was soon established that the landlady's theory was the correct one.

Mrs. Waddell had received the following note intended for Montgomery:

I am sorry that we should have parted with some misunderstanding. You meant well, I know, and you could not be expected to understand the circumstances. I shall think of you with positive affection in the new life I am leading, and though we may never meet again my prayers will be constantly with you.

A. L

"When I came to that bit about positive affection I said to my husband, 'Fancy that, now! All the time that little Lovett was nourishing what you might call a hopeless passion for me,' and he said, 'Well, I always thought old Jubilee was half cracked, and now I know he was off his onion altogether.' But when I read out the bit about prayers, my husband said, 'Well, I'm not so sure but he wasn't right in his head after all, for if anybody needed praying for it's you,' and he laughed fit to burst himself."

Montgomery had received the following note intended for Mrs. Waddell:

If you think any of the garments I left are not beyond repair, please forward them to me at the

## DEATH OF A DOG

Good Cheer Mission, 272 East India Dock Road, London. I am happy to be able to enclose thirty shillings in lieu of a week's notice. You will be glad to hear that I have found a new and useful sphere of work. Destroy the bottles, as I feel herbs are a vain thing. Kind regards to you and Mr. Waddell.

A. L.

"There was no money enclosed," explained Montgomery.

"I wonder who's received that thirty shillings," said Mrs. Waddell. "I'll take the opportunity of mentioning it when I send on his shirts, though it will probably be found that he's sent it in error to his aunt at Portsmouth, with an application for a free sample, while the people who advertised the free sample get a letter full of love and kisses. My husband will laugh, especially when he hears that Lovett is now in the Good Cheer Mission. He ought to be able to make a good joke about that."



## CHAPTER VIII

### BLACKMAIL AND LIGHTER MATTERS

#### I

MISS PERKS did not hear about the death of the Partridges's dog until the evening, and then the news came from Mr. Winstanley.

"I am afraid things have not turned out as the Partridges might reasonably have hoped," said Miss Perks's nephew after dinner. (Mr. Winstanley followed the sound rule that the discussion of unpleasant subjects should be deferred to the close of a meal.) "I mean that they are not going to be rich as a consequence of Councillor Speakman's death. It is even doubtful whether they will reap any monetary benefit at all. The probability is that they will not be a penny the better." Mr. Winstanley shrugged his shoulders. "It would seem that Councillor Speakman's death has not produced any good results at all. Upon my soul, we have seen nothing but disappointments. First the motor-racing scheme goes on as if no one had ever died, and now Mrs. Partridge is left in such a state that it is difficult even to surmise what she will do."

"Is this definite?" inquired Miss Perks. "Official,

as the newspapers say when they want you to believe that for once they have got hold of the truth?"

"I am afraid so. The lawyer from Helmstone came over to see Mrs. Partridge this afternoon, and Mrs. Partridge told the Vicar all about it, and I had it from the Vicar. They have begun to see daylight in the task of unravelling Councillor Speakman's affairs, which were excessively complicated, and they have come to the conclusion that he died in debt. He must have borrowed heavily to support his various enterprises, including" . . . Mr. Winstanley's face darkened . . . "that estate of labour-saving Tudor bungalows on the Downs, and there was very little to set against it. If he had lived he would probably have carried things with a high hand to a prosperous issue . . . it must be admitted that he was a very able man in his own peculiar way . . . but since he is dead and the driving force has been lost . . ." Mr. Winstanley, unable to complete his sentence, sighed and made a gesture. "It is very sad. Upon my soul, it is very sad."

"How did the Partridges take the news?"

"Partridge, they say, has gone away again. According to Mrs. Partridge, he has gone to Eastbourne to apply for a job. As for Mrs. Partridge . . . well, it is most extraordinary."

"How?" asked Miss Perks. "I dislike being told things in riddles."

"You would never have done for one of the early Apostles," said Mr. Winstanley with an unusual

effort of humour. "However, I tell the story as the Vicar related it to me. While Mrs. Partridge was recounting what the lawyer had told her, her eyes were suffused with tears, and she was only too evidently a prey to strong emotion. He ventured to commiserate with her when he had finished, to tell her that she must go on hoping and that she had good friends who would rally round her, and so on and so forth. To which she replied, sobbing, that she was not worrying at all about the money, but about the dog. As the Vicar had not heard about the dog, this naturally puzzled the good man."

"As I have not heard about the dog either," said Miss Perks, "it not unnaturally puzzles me too. Hasn't the deplorable creature returned home?"

"The deplorable creature, as you call it . . . and if it were not for *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, I should be tempted to echo your description . . ."

"I gather that the dog is dead."

"The dog it was that died," agreed Mr. Winstanley. "Poisoned."

Miss Perks echoed the word with a light in her face that was strange to her nephew. He repeated, in a puzzled fashion, "Yes, poisoned. I cannot see that there is anything strange about that. Mrs. Partridge's dog was so generally ill-spoken of that the strange thing is it had not been poisoned before. I know several people who would willingly have poisoned it. Yes, upon my soul I do."

Miss Perks considered this news with much knit-

ting of her brows. She did not speak for a minute or two. When she did speak, the question she asked startled Mr. Winstanley.

"Had that dog a weak heart?" she asked.

"What an extraordinary question to ask! Considering the age and the general state of health of the poor animal, I think it may be taken for granted that its heart was no longer as strong as it should have been. But why do you ask?"

"Questions are not always to be taken literally," said Miss Perks. "I was not really expecting an answer. I suppose it is not known who poisoned the wretched brute. Do they know what was the poison used?"

"The vet was unable to tell. He thought it must be a new one in his experience. However, poisoned the dog was: there is no doubt whatever about that."

"Country vets are probably not well versed in toxicology. It is a pity," said Miss Perks, speaking with great seriousness.

## 2

In the ordinary way the poisoning of a dog would not create a great stir in the countryside, where, unfortunately, such a thing happens, by accident or design, only too frequently. There were special circumstances in this case. The thought of poison was already in people's minds. Although the death of the dog Lady was mourned by no one except its owner, public opinion considered it a sinister event:

a sign that there still lurked in the village a ruthless felon. The villagers believed that this public enemy was experimenting with new poisonous preparations: trying them, in accepted fashion, on the dog. The local veterinary surgeon encouraged this belief: since the dog had died from the effects of a drug unknown to him, the deed must have been done by someone with a specialist knowledge of poisons. The village was more convinced than ever that Councillor Speakman had been poisoned, and daily it expected to hear of another victim.

The rumour thickened until it hung like a black shadow over the village. Mr. Winstanley and the Vicar, none the less, remained in ignorance of it until the day after Partridge's departure for Eastbourne.

The two of them were hobnobbing over gardening topics on the front lawn of the Vicarage when the doctor's car drew up outside and the doctor himself came fuming up the drive in a state of extreme moral indignation.

"Have you heard, Vicar? Have you heard, Winstanley?" he began without preamble. He took off his old-fashioned hat, which looked like a bowler that had made an effort to grow into a topper and had abandoned the attempt when half-way to success, and, drawing a red silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, mopped the perspiration from his brow. "It's infernally hot."

The Vicar and Mr. Winstanley had agreed only a few minutes before that there was a noticeable drop

in the temperature since the morning, but Doctor Prout was plainly in a frame of mind when contradiction would have been dangerous. They uttered vague murmurs which might have been construed as signifying assent.

"Really, in all my fifty years of practice, it's the most infernal piece of crass stupidity I've ever come across. Do they think I'm an old fool or a blundering novice?" He added one of those noises inadequately spelt, "Ugh!"

Mr. Winstanley looked at his medical adviser with concern. Prout was usually a model of calm. His bedside manner was perfect. Mr. Winstanley had never before seen Prout throw off his professional air of declining to be surprised by anything. It was sad to remark this lost control, this use of immoderate language, this mopping of brows on a cool afternoon. For the first time Mr. Winstanley studied those swollen veins in the old man's forehead, that bleared look about his eyes, that falling-in of the cheeks. People had said Prout was "getting past his job," and really it seemed there must be some truth in the imputation. Mr. Winstanley then and there resolved to change his doctor. That was not so easy as it sounded, he believed: it was not as simple as changing one's grocer. There was some nonsense about professional etiquette which was supposed to prevent doctors from taking on their colleagues' dissatisfied patients. Why didn't Prout retire? It was a duty he owed to society. Could it not be delicately hinted

to him? Could the Vicar be persuaded to drop a gentle word of advice into his ear? The whole business was most unfortunate, reflected Mr. Winstanley. He had grown used to Prout, and to take away one of his props did no good to a delicate man. As he considered the grievousness of his situation he felt the oncoming of the severest symptoms of gastric trouble. He would dine off dry toast and hot water that night. Let Miss Perks say what she would!

"I told 'em so," Prout was saying in a loud and angry voice. "I gave 'em a piece of my mind. I told 'em they were making fools of 'emselves and I should have the laugh of 'em yet. Such utter damned nonsense! They lend an ear to every cock-and-bull story and as good as tell a medical man of fifty years' experience that he can't believe the evidence of his own eyes."

The Vicar, slowly stroking his chin, waited for further light. Mr. Winstanley shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Well, I can't stand here talking all day," said Prout, clapping his antique hat on to his elderly head. "I've got an extensive practice to attend to. I can't afford to waste my time on foolish gossip, whatever some people can do who ought to know better. Jacks-in-office! Blundering ninnies! Nincompoops! Damned fools! Pah!"

The aged doctor stumped off down the drive, still muttering abusive epithets. The Vicar called after him.

"Prout!"

"What is it now?"

"My dear Prout," said the Vicar, "I find myself quite in the dark, and I believe I am right in saying that our friend Winstanley also finds himself quite in the dark, over all this. What precisely is amiss?"

"Amiss? You ask me what is amiss? Then haven't the chuckleheaded jackanapeses come to you yet?"

"What chuckleheaded jacka . . ." The Vicar found himself doubtful about the plural form of this word. "Who haven't come to me yet?"

"The police, man, the police!" shouted the doctor. "Did you think I meant the Boy Scouts or the Girl Guides or your Mothers' Meeting? Don't you understand that when I talk about incompetent blockheads I am referring as plainly as possible to the County Police?"

"You must forgive me, my dear Prout. Really I had no such notion. Why should the police come to see me? Have I done anything?"

"Don't be a fool, Vicar." Prout took out his red handkerchief again and applied it to his brow. "Sorry," he grunted. "Shouldn't have called you a fool. But surely you are an arrant ass, Vicar, if you don't know what I'm talking about. You must know what the talk of the place is. This whispering gallery of congenital idiots which you call your parish and I, God help me, call my practice . . . you don't



mean to say they can fill the sky with their imbecile babblings and not a sound comes to your ears?"

"Indeed, sad as it is to admit such ignorance, I fear that must be the case, for I am still entirely at a loss."

"Speakman!" roared the old man. "Speakman! That's what all the noise is about. Speakman! As if I didn't know a simple case of heart failure when I saw one! As if I could be presented with a death from irritant poisoning and have no more suspicions than a babe unborn! Pah! After fifty years of practice, to be called in question by a pack of cretinous policemen who have been listening to the ravings of the village idiots! Pah!"

Shaking with rage, the old man stumbled away towards his car. The Vicar and Mr. Winstanley stood looking at each other in consternation.

"Sad," murmured the Vicar, breaking the dreadful silence. "I fear poor Prout is getting old."

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley, "I believe he is losing his grip."

"But this is a serious matter," ruminated the parson. "I am not sure I have the right end of the stick even yet, but it would appear that there are unpleasant rumours about. People are saying that Speakman did not meet a natural death but was poisoned . . . dreadful, Winstanley, dreadful."

"I can't credit it, Vicar."

"That he was poisoned . . . and the police are taking it seriously. If they are coming to me . . .

and poor Prout seems to have got it into his head that such is their intention . . . it can mean only one thing. An exhumation, my dear Winstanley. A most unpleasant business."

"Upon my soul, I can't believe it, Vicar," murmured poor Mr. Winstanley.

The Vicar pulled up a weed or two.

"It is a scandal I should have asked to be spared. If it must be faced, let us hope that Prout is right: that this is a cock-and-bull story about poisoning, and that Speakman's death was a simple case of heart failure. Let us devoutly hope that."

"I wish I could regain the implicit faith in Prout I once had."

"He is growing old, my dear Winstanley. His temper does not improve as he ages: that is a common failing. If he took the high line with the police that he gave us to understand, one can readily imagine that they were prejudiced against him. Let us hope once more that he is not too old and infirm of mind to make a mistake like that. Let us hope he is still able to distinguish between death from failure of the heart's action and death from . . . God forbid!" The Vicar sat down on a garden chair and looked sorrowfully at Mr. Winstanley. "God forbid!" he repeated.

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley, "Speakman's death seems to have been a great mistake from every point of view."

The Vicar pondered this curious remark but offered no comment.

"Well, Winstanley," he said, rising, "the worst has not yet happened. It may never happen. The police no doubt felt it their duty to take notice of the rumours that came to their ears. They consulted Prout. Possibly Prout was more successful in dealing with them than he has led us to suppose. In any event, they will surely require more definite evidence before they proceed to extremes. Exhumation is a grave matter, my dear Winstanley."

"Upon my soul, Vicar, I should not have thought you capable of making a joke on such a subject!"

"Did I make a joke? It was quite unconscious, I assure you. What was it I said? Oh, yes, I see." The Vicar did not smile. "Well, my dear Winstanley, if you will excuse me, I must go to my study. There is a sermon to be written. The world goes on. Sunday comes round in its due season. We must face things as they come. Perhaps the worst will not happen. Good-bye for the present, my dear Winstanley."

## 3

Charteris had taken to spending much of the spare time bestowed upon him by the licensing laws in working quite furiously at his garden. On this afternoon he was transplanting cabbages, and his labours were watched by Telford, who sat on a tree-stump and smoked cigarettes.

"They tell me Partridge has left the village again, Jack."

"Good riddance," rejoined the landlord of the King's Arms.

"Gone to Eastbourne, they say."

"So long as he's gone somewhere."

"So the great battle will be postponed for the present."

"Meaning?"

"You threatened to refuse him admission to the pub, and he replied, I understand, by promising to have the law on you."

"That's finished with. I've changed my mind."

"Oh, you have? Well, I think you were right to climb down, Jack. You know you hadn't a leg to stand on."

"No?"

"What on earth made you do such a thing in the first place?"

"A sudden whim."

"No further details available?"

"Well, no."

"You're not in a very talkative mood this afternoon, Jack." Telford let him alone for a while. Then, beginning again: "Fine woman, Mrs. Partridge, Jack."

Charteris did not answer.

"Too good to be wasted on a fellow like Partridge, don't you think?"

Charteris, pressing the earth down around a plant, answered nothing.

"It's curious how often you see fine women

like Mrs. Partridge attached to poor specimens of humanity," pursued Telford.

Mrs. Charteris appeared at the back door of the house.

"Oh, Jack, I've been feeling ever so queer again. I felt dizzy. It's queer how often I feel dizzy now. I don't know what I do to make me feel dizzy, do you?"

Charteris threw down a handful of plants and looked at her in despair.

"It's no good going on like this. You must see Doctor Prout."

"People say he's an old fool."

"I'm not sure he's such an old fool as people make out. Still, if you don't want to see Prout, we'll have somebody else."

"I don't want to see a doctor. I know I ought to see a doctor, but I don't want to. Somehow doctors never seem to do me any good. I don't know why it is. Still, if these fits keep on coming on I suppose I shall have to see a doctor."

Telford saw the muscles of Charteris's face twitch. Yet the unfortunate husband answered calmly enough, "All right, then. Let me know which doctor you want to see, and you shall see him."

"You don't sound very sympathetic. People never show me any sympathy, and I don't know why, but I do think my own husband ought to be more sympathetic. Some husbands would worry their wits out if their wives kept on having fainting fits."

"I am worried about you, but sympathy doesn't do any good. The best thing is to see a doctor, and then we can do everything for you that he advises."

"I might be a horse, the calm way you talk about me."

Charteris flushed and bent down to his task. Mrs. Charteris stood watching him, a malevolent look on her face.

"What was it you were saying about Mrs. Partridge?" she asked abruptly.

"Nothing in particular."

"Yes, you were. What was it?"

"It was my remark," put in Telford, watching her ironically. "I was saying that Mrs. Partridge was a fine woman, and it was a pity she had been wasted on such a husband."

"You've got far too much to say about Mrs. Partridge, if you ask me."

Mrs. Charteris delivered her opinion angrily, and went indoors. The two men fell silent. Charteris went on transplanting cabbages, Telford continued his lazy enjoyment of his cigarette.

Presently Telford said, "I always thought she made a fuss over that dog of hers as a sort of emotional release."

Charteris appeared to ponder this remark.

"It was an excellent idea of someone's to poison that dog," added Telford. "I hope someone will now proceed to poison Partridge."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," said the older man. "There's too much talk of poisoning for my liking."

"You're right. Half the local population talks to me about poison, and I'm sick of having to change the subject." Telford spoke vigorously. "Let them dig Speakman up, if they think he ought to be dug up. Otherwise, let the poor blighter rest."

"Yes," said Charteris quietly. "I'm sick of the subject too."

"You haven't received a visit from the police, I suppose?"

"Eh, what?" asked Charteris sharply.

"Police inquiries would be a preliminary to exhumation, I imagine," said Telford idly. "If you haven't, I suppose they are letting the matter drop. Good thing, too."

"Why should they come to me?" asked the inn-keeper defensively.

"Pretty obvious, isn't it? Speakman was in the saloon bar that afternoon. They would follow up all his movements."

Charteris grunted.

"Talking about poisoning, Jack, have you heard anything from Lovett? I say, old man, you're rather inclined to drop things this afternoon, aren't you? Well, I quite understand. You have a good deal to worry you. You had a letter from Lovett yesterday, didn't you?"

"How on earth did you know that?"

"My detective instinct, Jack. Don't tell me if the contents were private."

"They were."

"But you were rather surprised to find thirty shillings in it, weren't you?"

Charteris, meek man, became almost threatening. "Have you been meddling with my letters, Telford?"

"Believe me, Jack, I haven't seen your letters. All this is brilliant detective work: following up of clues. The explanation is quite simple. The thirty shillings was intended for Mrs. Waddell, and should have been enclosed in a letter to her. Poor Lovett was such an absent-minded sort of fellow."

Charteris looked hard at the amateur detective.

"I'm glad to hear you haven't been meddling with my letters. I should be very much annoyed if I thought anybody was tampering with my correspondence."

"You can acquit me of that, old man."

"I'm very glad to hear it." Charteris spoke in such a way that Telford felt somewhat abashed.

"I shouldn't be so clever at coming out with my detective deductions," he admitted. "They are apt to make people suspicious. I should keep them for my novel."

"It would be better," said Charteris.

He showed no disposition to resume conversation; and becoming bored after a little of watching the landlord's bowed back, Telford strolled away.



Miss Perks met the chauffeur and the parlourmaid walking in amorous dalliance through the lane at evening. Pennington's rosy face grew rosier: the parlourmaid, proud of her conquest, cheerfully returned Miss Perks's smile. She whispered something to her lover as they passed on, and Pennington came back and touched his cap.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, "but I thought you ought to know that there is a tramp up this lane."

"Thank you, Pennington, for telling me. Is he a thin tramp, badly in need of a shave, and carrying a big stick?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Excellent."

"He looks rather a nasty customer, ma'am."

"Then you will know in what direction to send the search party if I don't return," said Miss Perks. "You go on with your courting, Pennington. Enjoy life while you are yet young."

Pennington blushed again and retired. Miss Perks went straight on, and a few minutes later the tramp lifted his battered black hat as she came within his field of observation.

"Good evening, ma'am. A lovely evening. Then came still evening on, and twilight grey had in its sober livery all things clad."

"How did you come to be a tramp?" inquired Miss Perks, halting and regarding him with a quizzical expression.

"I am a Bohemian, madam. A rebel against convention. Why, I asked myself in early manhood, should I bind myself with the chains in which I saw my fellow men fettered? I could see no reason, and so I broke free from these constraints, and wooed the only kind of life that is suited to a man. I go where I wish, I eat and drink when the mood takes me, I retire when I am weary, and I rise when I am refreshed. Others are slaves to the clock: I have shaken off all thralldom. Give to me the life I love, let the lave go by me."

"You talk like a fifth-rate poet," said Miss Perks with disgust. "In sober fact, you are sick of the sight of the open road and you have worn your boots out and your clothes are so ragged that you get no proper sleep because you shiver at night. So far from eating and drinking when you wish, you never have enough to eat and drink. As for being a slave to nobody, you will go a mile out of your way to avoid a policeman. Whether it is a characteristic worthy only of sheep to follow the conventions is a matter of opinion. Personally I think you would be none the worse for a hot bath and a clean shave. Taking all in all, do you think you are any happier for being a tramp?"

The tramp winked.

"There is a good deal in what you say, madam,

and if I may be permitted the observation, it is tersely and effectively expressed. You see in me a victim to the cozenry of the romantic writers. I thought this nomadic life, so highly praised in prose and poetry, and the theme of so many songs rendered by lusty baritones at smoking concerts, must be the end of every man's desire. As I grow old, I confess I was wrong. I have been misled. The tramp's life, madam, has its unfortunate side, and you have put your finger on some of its weakest points. *Tetigit rem acu.*"

"Which means?"

"With her native woman's wit she hit off the matter to a T." The tramp bowed gallantly.

"I see. May I ask whether you are waiting to see Mr. Partridge?"

The man raised his eyebrows.

"I have an appointment here with the person in question. I will not be so tactless as to inquire how you came to know."

"It surprises you to see that he has confided in anybody, does it? Consider the implications of that, and you will see that you are in for a disappointment, my man. In the first place, you can give up all hope of seeing Partridge this evening. He is in Eastbourne, from his point of view a much better place."

The tramp produced his blackened pipe.

"You have no objection to my smoking, madam? It is a great consolation. We gentlemen of the road

lack one word in our vocabulary. We do not know the meaning of disappointment. When things turn out better than usual, that is a pleasant surprise. When they turn out badly, that is what we are accustomed to, and we take it in our stride. I had arranged to meet our friend Partridge here. He does not turn up. What then? I light a pipe. I shall have the pleasure of seeing him some other time. There is no hurry."

"If I were you," suggested Miss Perks, "I should apply to his lawyers. They will be able to tell you his financial position. He is worth rather less, I should imagine, than you are."

"And God knows that is little enough. As to the impecuniosity of our dissipated friend, you tell me nothing new. I diagnosed as much at our first encounter. I have an unerring flair for these estimates. But the situation has changed. He has great expectations."

"You are under a great misapprehension. I thought as much, and that is why I recommend you to go to his lawyers. They would tell you that his father-in-law died insolvent."

"Dear, dear!" The tramp shook his head. "These business men, madam, the more I hear of their lack of thrift, the more I understand the wretched plight of our basic industries. To think that a gentleman in a position to make so much money should die possessed of even less than a gentleman of the road: for he has debts, and a tramp is in

a position to contract none. He died too soon: he should have died later."

"You take things very philosophically," said Miss Perks, not without a certain respect. "That is your one redeeming feature, so far as I can judge. You do well to have a redeeming feature, for since you have the worst vice of all, you probably possess all the rest."

"The worse vice, madam, being . . . ?"

"That blend of avarice and cruelty which makes a man stoop to blackmail, the lowest and meanest of crimes."

"You are blunt, madam. I bear you no ill will. So you think blackmail the worst of crimes? Worse even than murder? Worse even than killing a helpless elderly man in a church?"

"What has the locality got to do with it?"

"In law, madam, nothing. In sentiment, a great deal. But I see you have no patience with sentiment."

"None at all," said Miss Perks vigorously, "and none whatever with despicable creatures who utter insinuations they cannot substantiate. You creep into a church, you hide in a pew, you hear angry words, you crawl to a place where you can see without being seen, you witness one man lay his hand on another, you see the second man collapse and die, and your mind, once a sharp instrument but now dulled by years of brutish thinking, jumps to the conclusion that murder has been done."

"You describe the circumstances with great

accuracy," said the tramp. "You might have been there. When I saw what I saw, was I not justified in thinking that murder had been committed? Or, to put the matter at its lowest, manslaughter?"

"When you lay your hand on the shoulder of a man who has taken a fatal dose of poison, does it make you an accessory to the crime?"

The tramp looked at her with a mocking smile.

"Really, madam, the plot thickens. I have no doubt all this is very elementary, but I am a veritable Watson in these matters. Your knowledge is stupendous. It is you who should do the blackmailing, not I. Indeed I think I shall retire from the field, for I agree with you that blackmail is not one of the most admirable arts, and had it not been for the prospect of raising money by its aid I should never have soiled my lips with it. Since even the hope of pecuniary gain is denied me, if what you say is true, and I do not doubt it in the least . . . since the matter stands as it does, I shall retire altogether from the blackmailing business."

"I am glad to hear it," said Miss Perks. "Although the reason for your decision does you no credit, it is a most sensible decision to come to, and renders it unnecessary for me to communicate with the police."

"You are very thoughtful, madam. No doubt the police have their hands fully occupied with this poisoning case. Strange that so pleasant a corner of the earth should be the scene of such a tragedy! The ways of Providence are inscrutable."

"I am not responsible for the ways of Providence," confessed Miss Perks, "or things would happen differently. At the moment I am more interested in your ways. If they lead you elsewhere, as far as possible and with the least possible delay, it will be to the advantage of all concerned."

"To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new. You will notice, madam, that I avoid the common misquotation. If my progress is but slow, you must make allowances for a pilgrim poorly shod, whose feet, as you justly surmised, are furnished with corns. I regret that the state of my exchequer does not allow me to make use of more rapid means of transport."

"It is useless to drop hints about the state of your exchequer. I make it a rule never to give money to tramps. By the same token, I have been careful to bring no money with me."

"Thus taking precautions against your instinctive kindness of heart," said the tramp, with a smile.

Miss Perks snorted.

"If you would allow me to say so," added the ragged man, "you are one of the most remarkable old ladies it has ever been my good fortune to encounter. It would be a great privilege to have some small souvenir of our meeting. That little gold brooch you are wearing . . ."

"That little gold brooch," said Miss Perks, "has already been stained with the blood of a murdered man. If ever you are tempted again to blackmail, think of that. There's a parable for you. That

thought will be enough to remind you of me, should you wish to be reminded. I should like to feel that you are turning to a more intelligent way of life, but I am not such an old fool as to be able to believe it. So, good-bye."

"Farewell," said the tramp, with an enormous flourish of his big black hat.

Miss Perks turned on her heel and walked with slow but decisive steps down the lane. The tramp, looking after her, murmured, "*Vera incessu patuit dea*" . . . for he had been a classical scholar of Trinity.



## CHAPTER IX

### A STORM BREWS

#### I

ON his third morning in Eastbourne, Partridge met with a success that surprised himself. He ran across an old acquaintance whom he tapped to the tune of no less than ten pounds, a sum of money equivalent in his eyes to a small fortune. It might have been true that this loan was induced by knowledge of the relationship in which Partridge stood to the late Councillor Speakman; it was possible that Partridge suppressed the real facts and pictured himself as the heir to thousands, embarrassed only temporarily while waiting for the conclusion of the legal formalities that stood between him and his prospective wealth. To be reduced to such evasions had long ceased to embarrass him. He had a few drinks with a cheerful conscience, and, forgetting such unpleasant things as tramps, took the first train for Helmstone on his way back to the village. He even made a good resolution. He would repay Mrs. Burwash: she had been a good friend to him, better than most, and the least he could do was to see that she did not lose by it.

Supported by this pious resolve, Partridge drowsed in the corner of a third-class compartment as far as Lewes, where he woke up and began to feel quarrelsome. It was time he stood up for himself. That tramp! Well, the tramp was of no account. He would settle that fellow's hash: if words were not enough, he would knock him down. Let him go to the police after that if he dared. No, the tramp was a scallywag and did not pretend to be anything better: the respectable people, persons like the Vicar and Mr. Winstanley and that little fool Charteris, they were the ones who most needed to be put in their places. Who were they that they should cold-shoulder him? They were to enjoy the rough side of Partridge's tongue; and Miss Perks, who specialized in that kind of currency, should be paid back in her own coin. Then there was Copplestone. Partridge had very special plans for Copplestone. He was to be wiped off the map, figuratively speaking.

Looking out of the carriage window on to Lewes platform, Partridge saw Copplestone enter a first-class compartment in the same coach. The councillor had been to Lewes on some official business and he was dressed with some pomp, in a beautifully cut suit, with a grey Homburg hat crowning his upper end, and a pair of spats lending distinction to his lower. His countenance, usually forbidding, was creased into a satisfied smile: he radiated a new prosperity. The stationmaster touched his hat.

Seventy demons raged in Partridge's breast.

Alcohol had slowed down his movements, or the stationmaster would have been scandalized to see a disreputable middle-aged man leap from a third-class carriage door and assail with whirlwind blows the distinguished personage who was honouring the railway by his patronage. By the time Partridge had got his hand to the door the train was moving out. He fretted in his corner for some minutes until a light dawned upon him. This was a corridor train. Corridor trains had their advantages. He left his compartment and walked unsteadily in the direction of Copplestone's. A door divided the first-class section of the coach from the third. It was locked. Partridge shook it and knocked upon it and kicked it, but it declined to open. He almost wept. He returned to his corner and sat with his head in his hands.

The train, quite unconcerned, ran cheerfully on towards Helmstone. Now Helmstone is built where the Downs dip sharply to the sea. The main road into the town from London takes advantage of a natural valley in these hills. The railway line from the east has to pass from one ridge to another across this depression and does so by means of a long viaduct which in its time was a great engineering feat. Helmstone people are a little proud of this viaduct, and will tell you that among the workmen engaged upon it was the great Tom Sayers, at that time a humble plasterer's labourer, innocent of his future triumphs in the ring. There is something

Roman in the massiveness of this viaduct. It belongs to the tradition that held sway until men began to put up pillars of concrete and link them easily by girders of steel. The arches are built entirely of bricks, apart from the coping, whose stone pillars stand nearly a hundred feet above the restless traffic of the road from London.

In the early stages of this viaduct there is a subsidiary Helmstone station, and at this the train stopped. Partridge's slowly moving brain grasped his chance just in time. He left his compartment and flung himself into Copplestone's as the train got under way. Copplestone was reading a newspaper. He put it down to glance at this unceremonious intruder. He had a sinking of the heart when he recognized Partridge, but he affected not to know him, and put up his paper as a barrier between them. Partridge snatched the sheet away, and stood above the cowering councillor with a sneer on his face.

"You old devil, you," he said slowly, "you lewd old devil. You gave me a black eye, did you? You gave me a black eye when I wasn't looking. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? I'm going to leave you a nasty mess that your mother wouldn't recognize."

He beamed at the thought, and automatically began to peel off his coat. Copplestone made a frantic leap upwards and hung on to the communication cord. Then, in his fear, he opened the carriage door and shouted foolishly for help.

The train had already slowed down. At this point of the viaduct some of the stone pillars had suffered erosion from the effects of time and the weather, and workmen were engaged in removing and replacing them, lest they should fall on to the heads of the people who circulated unsuspectingly on the road so far below. Partridge, seeing his prey make an effort to escape him, flung himself with violence upon the terrified Copplestone. The workmen who had put down their tools to let the train crawl past saw a couple of elderly passengers, clinging together and struggling desperately, tumble from a first-class compartment. The workmen shouted. They ran towards the spot. Partridge, disengaging himself from his antagonist, feeling no hurt in the excitement of the minute, stood for a moment disconcerted by the cries and the sight of the men racing along the line in his direction. Then he saw his enemy making a pitiful effort to struggle to his feet. Partridge had no other thoughts now than vengeance. He fell upon Copplestone. The two stood grappling with each other in a fury which knew nothing of the science of Tom Sayers, and, as the foremost of the runners reached them, they stumbled, locked together, over the edge of the viaduct.

It was a matter for great congratulation that Partridge and Coppelstone killed no one else by their fall. As the newspapers recorded, some onlookers were removed to hospital suffering from shock, but following treatment were able to go home.

The news of the two men's horrible deaths reached Mrs. Partridge, and she went upstairs with a set face and locked herself in her room. If with her tears there obtruded itself an unseemly thought that this marked the end of a long, dreary, futile phase of her life, who would there be to blame her? But she loved her husband and she mourned his dreadful passing.

The news, three or four days late, reached the tramp, who read it on a scrap of newspaper which had wrapped the bacon he was frying by the roadside. He shrugged his shoulders and uttered an exclamation which made an elderly gentleman in gold-rimmed spectacles raise his eyebrows and pass on with a reflection upon these terrible days of depression when tramps spoke Latin.

The news reached Mr. Winstanley, who said, "Upon my soul! Well, I always thought that poor fellow would come to a bad end." It reached the Vicar, who was much grieved, and retired to his study to think over what he might say to comfort Mrs. Partridge. It reached Telford, who began to feel that events were becoming altogether too com-

plicated. He studied his embryo beard in the looking-glass and decided that it was not being a success. He shaved it off and went back to Bloomsbury, where he wrote a detective story which had a *succès d'estime*. It reached Charteris, who after the first shock brightened and hung about in places where he thought there might be a chance of catching sight of Mrs. Partridge; and then grew moody, so that his customers remarked upon it, and put it down to the trials he suffered from that wife of his.

The news reached Miss Perks, who grunted, and said that she was not going to pretend to be sorry, for the world was no worse for the loss of either Partridge or Coppelstone; but afterwards she became very thoughtful, and Mr. Winstanley hoped that she was repenting her uncharitable outburst, whereas the truth was that she had her mind fixed upon something else.

Also the news reached Mrs. Burwash, and she wept, and ceased to bother about the new house, or about removing from Rosemary Cottage, or, indeed, about anything at all.

## 3

The future of Mrs. Partridge was a subject which gave both Mr. Winstanley and the Vicar much concern. They could not look upon the death of her husband as something to be greatly deplored, even though they refused to go all the way with Miss Perks, who roundly declared that it was a blessing.

In any event, Partridge's departure from the world affected Mrs. Partridge's financial situation neither one way nor the other: it was plainly desperate.

"She is an excellent woman," said the Vicar, "but she was not brought up to earn her own living. Strange, in these days, especially as her father was a business man. But there it is. I do not know what career she is fitted for. She might perhaps breed dogs."

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley, "the painful memories I have of the deplorable brute she once kept do not inspire me with any confidence in her future as a dog-fancier."

"Perhaps not," admitted the Vicar. "Presumably, too, such a calling would require initial capital. No. I see nothing for it except" . . . he looked hard at Mr. Winstanley . . . "marrying again."

"There is always that." Mr. Winstanley looked thoughtfully at the Vicar and, finding the Vicar's eyes fixed upon him, turned his head away and studied the portrait of his one military ancestor.

"She is much grieved at the loss of Partridge," continued the Vicar, "but the time may come . . . must come, in the natural course of things . . . when she will be willing to accept consolation elsewhere. She is still quite young, my dear Winstanley. She is a splendid upstanding figure of a woman. As to her housekeeping qualities I cannot speak. I doubt whether she has had much opportunity of practising the domestic virtues. That need not necessarily be



a drawback if she marries a man of position. She is the sort of woman who would inspire respect in her servants. With her strong Christian principles she would be a power for good in any community she had an opportunity of serving." The Vicar continued to look very hard at Mr. Winstanley. He sincerely felt that it was time his bachelor friend married. A sensible wife would make a great deal of difference. Winstanley was inclined to be too self-centred, to worry about his little ills, to lead a rather vacant and futile life. A good helpmeet . . . a wife such as Mrs. Partridge might well prove to be . . . would draw him out, would spur him on to take a more active interest in things, would be good for his health and good for the parish.

"I quite agree, Vicar," said Mr. Winstanley. He withdrew his eyes from the portrait of his ancestor and looked at the Vicar, who turned his head away. "She is a handsome woman. She is strong and capable of vigorous effort. Upon my soul, I believe she would make an excellent wife for a man in any position, particularly one who wielded some influence, who was of some importance in his neighbourhood. I am inclined to think that if such a man at some future time . . . when a decent interval has elapsed . . . were to propose to Mrs. Partridge and be accepted . . . I am inclined to think that he might not repent it afterwards. Do you not agree with me, Vicar?" he asked earnestly.

"I do indeed," said the Vicar, "and I am very

glad to hear you say so. It is not good for man to live alone. I, my dear Winstanley, have already had experience of the connubial lot. For twenty years I was happily married, and I know what it is to be left without a partner to share one's sorrows and joys. A good wife, my dear Winstanley, is an inestimable blessing. She takes the burden of the house off one's masculine shoulders, so ill-equipped to bear them alone. She comforts one in sickness and health, and does many useful little tasks in the parish. I cordially commend the married state. It is ordained by nature and looked upon with high approval by the Church. Yes, my dear Winstanley, I hope that may be the happy outcome of all Mary Partridge's troubles. I hope to see her placed beyond want in a place of influence from which she can radiate good to the whole neighbourhood. Before many months, perhaps . . ." He broke off and smiled at Mr. Winstanley.

"Upon my soul, Vicar," said Mr. Winstanley heartily, "I am delighted to hear you speaking like that. Mrs. Partridge is a woman for whom I have the greatest respect, admiration and sympathy; and I have felt for a long time, Vicar, that you were not happy out of double harness. I applaud your resolve. I hope you will go in and win. I shall be the first to congratulate you."

The Vicar was considerably taken aback. He stroked his smooth chin.

"I . . . I scarcely meant it that way, my dear

Winstanley. My wife's memory is still so fresh and dear to me that I should feel it wrong to marry again. I shall remain faithful to her memory. It is out of the question that I should marry again." Indeed the Vicar, in his heart of hearts, found himself thinking at times that one marriage was all a man should be asked to make: he had then done his duty, and there was no special reason, in the absence of young children, why he should think himself bound to take another wife. It was possible to have too much of a good thing, and the delights of freedom, when one was fortunate enough to possess a good housekeeper, were not lightly to be abandoned. The Vicar was ashamed of having such thoughts as these, and he coughed. He continued, "No, my dear Winstanley, I consider myself dedicated; but with you it is another matter. I have long hoped to see you married. You will forgive a very old friend for speaking so frankly, but I feel that marriage . . . and remember, my dear Winstanley, I speak from experience . . . is exactly the one thing you need to complete your happiness."

"You surprise me, Vicar," said Mr. Winstanley. He again consulted his military ancestor. "If I wished to marry I should consider very favourably our good friend Mrs. Partridge as a possible wife . . . that is, if she showed herself willing to be approached . . . but I have no intention of marrying. I am a hardened bachelor. I shrink from trying experiments. Now you, with your experience . . . you

are just the sort of husband who would make an excellent match for Mrs. Partridge . . . you would be, if you don't mind my saying so, a very handsome couple . . . and, moreover, in my opinion, a parish clergyman should not remain a widower. It lessens his opportunities of serving the community."

The Vicar smiled, and leaned back in the attitude which suggested that he was about to fill the study with the fragrance of a peculiarly excellent brand of tobacco. "I fear, my dear Winstanley, we have been at cross-purposes. Not for the first time. There was that unfortunate misunderstanding about Pennington. But here, surely, there is no cause for dispute. You are an eligible husband. You are younger than I am. Mrs. Partridge is an eligible wife. So, my dear Winstanley . . ."

"I am not going to be jockeyed into matrimony," said Mr. Winstanley with some heat. He regretted the outburst at once. "Not, of course, that I am suggesting any intrigue. But the subject is painful to me. I hope you will forgive me, Vicar, if I suggest that we should talk of something else."

At this moment the door opened to admit Miss Perks. The old lady saw the two men apparently engaged in a rather warm argument, and she hesitated. "If you two are talking private affairs," she said, "I should prefer not to come in."

"Do come in, aunt," said Mr. Winstanley, snatching for once at the opportunity of detaining her. "We are not talking business."

"As a matter of fact," said the Vicar rather maliciously, when the old lady had made herself comfortable in her nephew's leather armchair, "we were discussing Mrs. Partridge and her future. I was venturing to suggest that she would make an excellent wife for someone."

"And how are you to know," inquired Miss Perks coldly, and with that ironical note in her voice which contact with clergymen never failed to evoke, "that Mrs. Partridge wants to make an excellent wife for someone? She has already done her best to make an excellent wife for one person, and a lot of good it has done her!"

"It is difficult to know, my dear Miss Perks, how else she may assure her future. If she chooses more wisely this time, she may yet bless the institution of marriage."

"So you are allowing her some choice in the matter," said Miss Perks, tossing her head. "That is very kind of you. And whom do you suggest that she chooses?"

The Vicar and Mr. Winstanley looked at each other. Miss Perks followed the direction of their glances and was enlightened at once; but she did not intend to be the first to break the embarrassed silence. On the contrary, she preferred to enjoy it as long as possible.

The Vicar was the first to speak.

"As you say, my dear Miss Perks," he remarked diplomatically, "that is a question for the lady her-

self to settle. I will only point out that there is at least one possible *parti*, if I may use the French expression."

Miss Perks grunted.

"I must not be more precise," added the Vicar, thinking that he was getting very well out of this.

Unfortunately, this nettled Mr. Winstanley, who found himself observing sulkily, "The Vicar is like Prout: very good at prescribing for other people."

"Well, you can't both marry Mrs. Partridge," said Miss Perks, choosing to misunderstand the situation. "The custom of the Vicar's friends the French would suggest that you settled the matter by a duel. Or you might go together to Mrs. Partridge and ask her to choose between you."

"My dear aunt!" said Mr. Winstanley.

"Marriage," said Miss Perks sagely, "is much better understood by the Vicar's friends the French than by us dull English people. Across the Channel marriages are arranged with every regard to suitability and convenience and with, I gather, precious little regard to such nonsense as love and affection. That is exactly as it should be. To avoid further dispute, may I be permitted to offer my services as arbitrator?"

The proposition staggered both parties and neither of them was sufficiently master of himself to protest.

Miss Perks assumed a judicial air. "Mrs. Partridge," she said, "is an excellent woman. She has cherished a worthless husband and it is probable that

she would make an even more devoted wife to a good husband, though on that point it is impossible to be sure, because experience shows that women are at least as incalculable in their behaviour as men. Let us keep to facts on which we can be certain. Mrs. Partridge is strong and active. Visiting in a scattered parish would be no great tax on her strength. At the same time, she might be too strenuous a companion for one who is or thinks he is bound to take great care of himself. Mrs. Partridge is no housekeeper. Obviously the life she has lived has unfitted her for looking after a home of her own. It is exceedingly doubtful whether she can cook a bit of steak, much less bake a girdle-cake. It is improbable that she can even darn a pair of socks. As you both have excellent housekeepers, such points are of minor importance. Thirdly, Mrs. Partridge attends morning services and is in every way, I understand, from the religious point of view, a person to be commended. I therefore award Mrs. Partridge to you, Vicar. You have my best wishes. However, we are settling the matter without the aid of Mrs. Partridge herself; and if she refuses you, Vicar, you must not turn round and blame me."

"My dear Miss Perks," began the Vicar, who had been anxious for some time to get a word in, "I am not . . ."

"If you will pardon my saying so, aunt," said Mr. Winstanley, "I really do not think . . ."

Miss Perks chuckled.

"I was hoping to set you two by the ears," she said. "I am disappointed. You would each be glad to see the other wedded, but you shrink from taking the plunge yourselves. It makes matters more difficult, because Mrs. Partridge obviously must marry again, and it would be very nice if she could marry one of you, for either of you would be an improvement on her previous choice. That, of course," added the old lady, catching a smile on the Vicar's lean face, "is not saying a great deal. But I understand what the obstacle is. I know what you are thinking at the back of your minds. Mrs. Partridge is not a lady."

"Upon my soul, aunt . . ."

"My dear Miss Perks . . ."

"Mrs. Partridge is not a lady," repeated Miss Perks ruthlessly. "She has the instincts of a lady and she has received what in the case of a lady is called a suitable education, but she is of humble origin. Her father was a speculative builder. No, don't interrupt. There is no need to be insincere. Good birth is still highly important in this country, especially in provincial circles. You, either of you, would be committing a social blunder if you married Mrs. Partridge. That is the trouble."

The Vicar and Mr. Winstanley both looked at the carpet. There was too much truth in the remarks Miss Perks had made. The Vicar knew only too well what snobs "the County" were. In his position he could not risk prejudicing his most influential



acquaintances. Mr. Winstanley had more independence, thought the Vicar, and could afford to be bolder in his matrimonial alliances. Mr. Winstanley, on the other hand, was thinking that a clergyman of all people need not worry about rank and station: he should be guided in his choice of a wife merely by her fitness for the duties she would be called upon to perform.

The Vicar was the first to speak.

"Perhaps this discussion is a little premature," he said good-humouredly. "Much as I should like to see your excellent nephew married to Mrs. Partridge or any other woman who would make him a good wife, I feel . . ."

"Much too premature," agreed Mr. Winstanley. "If later on Mrs. Partridge decides to marry again and chooses our excellent Vicar, no one would be better pleased than I, but in the meantime . . ."

"In the meantime," said Miss Perks, "lots of things may happen. Events may turn out very differently. It is quite on the cards that Mrs. Partridge may marry Mr. Charteris."

The two men stared at her.

"But, my dear Miss Perks, Mr. Charteris is a married man."

Miss Perks rose.

"In the meantime," she repeated, "lots of things may happen. Mrs. Charteris is in a very poor state of health, and in the meantime she may die."

The old lady walked slowly from the room.

She left behind her a silence that endured for several minutes. At last the Vicar rubbed his chin, smiled gently, and ventured to say, "My dear Winstanley, your aunt is a surprising old lady."

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Winstanley, "between you and me, Vicar, although really I ought not to say such a thing, I shall be relieved to see the back of her."

The Vicar nodded.

"When is she concluding her visit?"

"In a very few days now."

Mr. Winstanley sighed; and after a decent interval the two men fell to discussing the art of pruning rose-trees.

4

There was one bright spot in the picture at this time. The Vicar had heard nothing from the authorities. He was glad to conclude that Doctor Prout's testimony had silenced any suspicions in the minds of the police. He hoped the village was to be spared the scandal and unhealthy excitement of an exhumation. He had enough cares on his mind without all that. There was the thought of Mrs. Partridge. He felt it his duty to comfort her, and he went more than half-way to Mrs. Waddell's before he changed his mind and turned back. After that odd conversation with Mr. Winstanley and Miss Perks he found himself very sensitive on the subject

of Mrs. Partridge. There were people who would think he was setting his cap at the widow. One had to be very careful. Mrs. Burwash was another problem. The good man would have liked to help her, but he could not call at Rosemary Cottage again. One visit might have been enough to compromise him in the eyes of the village. It was a very delicate matter to be the parson of a parish. The Vicar took advantage of the fine weather to spend some time in his garden. The sun shone brilliantly. It bade fair to become uncomfortably warm.

Mrs. Partridge, when within doors, wrote letters and refused to see anyone. On her walks she avoided people. Three times in two days she encountered Charteris. On the first and second occasions she nodded and passed on. On the third he stopped in her path and she was obliged to speak to him.

"I hope you will allow me to offer my respectful sympathy," said the good-natured innkeeper a little nervously.

Mrs. Partridge thanked him very sincerely.

"It is a great blow for you, I am sure," went on Charteris. "I hope it does not mean that you will be leaving the village."

"I have no idea what I shall do," said Mrs. Partridge.

"If you will allow me to say so," said Charteris earnestly, "there are a good many people who feel for you and would be willing to do anything they possibly can."

Mrs. Partridge was melted.

"You are very kind," she said, smiling gratefully. "There is nothing better than misfortune for showing us who are our best friends."

"I hope you will believe that I am one of them," exclaimed Charteris, with the impulsive ardour of a lover.

"I am sure you are." Mrs. Partridge hesitated, smiled sadly, and walked quickly on.

"Good morning, Jack," said Montgomery, who had come round the bend in the road to find Charteris standing stock still and gazing at the diminishing view of Mrs. Partridge. "The weather is remarkably close for the time of year. I should not be surprised if we have thunder before long. How is Mrs. Charteris?"

"She's none too well. She still has those fits of dizziness. I want her to see a doctor but at the last moment she always raises some objection. I am not at all easy about her."

"I am sorry to hear that, very sorry indeed. I am sure you are anxious to do all you can for her. If you don't mind an old friend offering advice, I would suggest that you ask a doctor to call, without warning your wife beforehand. Which way are you going? Good. I will turn back and keep you company. I see you have been talking to Mrs. Partridge. She is a handsome woman, Jack, and I am sure she has the sympathy of all of us. I have no doubt she responds to it, for I believe I am correct in thinking that she

is of a warm and impulsive nature. There are dangers in such an open disposition, because people are apt to misunderstand spontaneous expressions of gratitude. I hope I am not being difficult to follow. I know I am sometimes difficult to follow because I try to express my thoughts as accurately as possible and in searching for the exact turn of phrase it is easy to get into a tangle. But I remember a friend of mine in a humble walk of life who fell in love with a wealthy woman. She was kind-hearted and from sheer charitableness of nature misled him into thinking that she reciprocated his feelings. So the time came when he ventured to propose marriage. The good woman was so astounded by this development that she was obliged to point out very forcibly the impossibility of an alliance between them. My friend suffered all the bitterest pangs of mortification and went away to Australia, where he married a squatter's daughter and now owns a large number of sheep."

"Oh," said Charteris.

"But that is perhaps enough on that subject," said Montgomery, "I don't quite know why I introduced it, except that for some reason, no doubt utterly irrelevant, it was put into my head when I saw you and Mrs. Partridge just now. Let us talk about something else. Mrs. Waddell tells me you have had a letter from Lovett. I am glad to hear that he has turned up again. I do not know in what capacity he is residing at the Good Cheer Mission, but I should imagine he is some kind of a lay evan-

gelist. I knew he had relatives connected with mission work in the East End and no doubt they have found him this occupation. It will be a change for him and I hope he will acquit himself well. His absent-mindedness, which was certainly a drawback when he dispensed medicines for Doctor Prout, will not be such a great handicap in his new rôle, for people think forgetfulness is excusable in clergymen and the like, if not even admirable. Did he tell you how he was getting on?"

"He said he is settling down to his new life very well," said Charteris glibly, "and has so much to do that he has no time to worry."

"That's excellent," said Montgomery. "When a man has something on his mind there is nothing like hard work for keeping him from worrying. I find a refuge from troubles in pitching hard into my history of the parish. You have your gardening to occupy your thoughts. I expect you are doing a great deal of gardening at present."

"I am," said Charteris. "I must get back to it."

"A publican has so much spare time on his hands," reflected Montgomery, "that it is a blessing when he is given a bit of ground he can cultivate, for the occupation keeps his mind from brooding. I am sure you must find your own garden a great refuge, especially at present. Which way are you taking now? Here is Miss Perks walking ahead of us."

"I've got to go down here," said Charteris hastily.

"Promised to see a man about something. Morning, Montgomery."

The organist nodded and walked on to overtake Miss Perks.

5

"Good morning, Miss Perks," said Montgomery, raising his cap. "I hope you are enjoying this beautiful weather. It is remarkably warm for the season and I am afraid we may have to pay for it with a thunderstorm before long. I have just been talking to Charteris. He tells me he has had a letter from Lovett. It is nice to know that Lovett is safe and sound. I suppose you have heard that he is now engaged in some capacity at the Good Cheer Mission in the East End, somewhere near the docks."

"I hadn't heard," said the old lady. "It seems highly inappropriate and therefore probably true. The oddest people, in my experience, get into clerical and quasi-clerical positions. Is he as absent-minded as ever?"

"So much so that he wrote three letters and put two of them into the wrong envelopes. In addition, he intended to send Mrs. Waddell a remittance but he put the money into Charteris's letter by mistake."

Miss Perks was thoughtful.

"So Alfred Lovett puts his letters into the wrong envelopes," she murmured, as if to herself.

"Arthur Lovett," corrected Montgomery.

"Arthur Lovett, is it? I love my love with an A,

because he is Arthur and absent-minded. He took me to an ante-room and gave me a dose of . . . Do you know any herbs beginning with A, Mr. Montgomery?" The old lady chuckled. "You must think I am growing crazy."

"Not at all, not at all," murmured Montgomery politely. "I think you are being a little playful, and I like to see people being a little playful from time to time. It smooths the rough corners of life. They tell me you are leaving the village very soon."

"To-morrow."

"Indeed! We shall not see much more of you then. And what do you think of our little corner of the world, Miss Perks?"

"I think it is a very pleasant little corner of the world, but like some other corners of the world it is inhabited by some queer people."

"I must admit that we have some odd characters, and several who perhaps are no better than they should be," remarked Montgomery. "Yet I do not find the local folk uncongenial. I have always made it my practice to take people as I find them, and also it has always been my belief that a little courtesy is a great help in . . . in . . ."

"In smoothing the rough corners of life," suggested Miss Perks.

"That precisely expresses my meaning, but I had used the phrase only a moment ago and was trying to find another. However, that is of no consequence. The important thing in the use of language is to



make oneself understood. I was going to add that if one exercises a little give-and-take and does not expect too much of other people, one gets along with the minimum of friction. On the other hand, if one allows oneself to criticize freely, and does not place a guard on one's tongue, and permits oneself to say things that more discreet people leave unsaid, one is not likely to become very popular with one's neighbours."

Miss Perks chuckled.

"Go on," she said.

"There is not much more to be said on that subject," observed Montgomery. "Perhaps I have already exhausted it. But I make my own observations as I go through the world and so formulate a working philosophy, which, if not scientifically accurate, is at least a good rule-of-thumb to go by. I have evolved a sort of technique, as I might say, for getting on with people. There are some subjects on which it is not possible to compromise. For example, I once had to tell some Helmstone councillors very plainly what I thought of them and their support of the proposal to ruin this little corner of the world. But that is an exception. On all matters except those of principle, I refrain from doing more than drop very gentle hints. It is possible to drop hints without giving offence if one studies the way to do it. I have only a few minutes ago had occasion to drop a hint to a great friend of mine, and I feel sure that he was not in the least offended. There are times when

something in the nature of a gentle hint is called for. But, much as one may disapprove of people, it is courting unpopularity to tell them to their face that they are stupid or worse. It is much better to be silent except under the greatest provocation, and even under provocation to use diplomacy."

Miss Perks turned her head to the heavens. "I believe the man is lecturing me!" she declared in mock horror.

"Lecturing you? Nothing is farther from my thoughts. I should never dream of doing such a thing."

"Oh, don't bother to deny it. You do it rather well as a matter of fact, and I deserve it. But it's wasted on me, Mr. Montgomery. I am a hardened offender, and bound to be unpopular wherever I go. It is sad, but there it is. . . . When you last saw Arthur Lovett, it was on the day he disappeared?"

Montgomery, switching back to the subject of Lovett with difficulty, said, "Yes."

"Was he in an agitated frame of mind?"

"He behaved rather strangely."

"Did you form the opinion that he intended to destroy himself?"

"I had no such idea at the time," came the guarded answer.

"On thinking it over, you have come to that conclusion since?" pursued the relentless old lady.

Montgomery did not answer.

"I see. That is exactly as I should suppose. Well,

Mr. Montgomery, I am glad I have had . . . or, rather, I should say I am glad you have been able to have this little talk with me. It is the meeting of opposites. You are a power for good in the community. I am an evil old woman."

"Come, come, Miss Perks. It is not right to talk like that. You . . ."

"I am an evil old woman. My mind at present is full of thoughts of evil. I think you are right, and we shall have a thunderstorm. It would be highly appropriate. Good-bye, Mr. Montgomery. Keep on being an influence for good and a tactful disseminator of helpful hints."

The remarkable old lady walked sturdily away.

## CHAPTER X

### THE STORM BREAKS

#### I

THE thunderstorm broke over the village between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Winstanley received warning of its approach. He was in his garden and, looking up at the sky, he saw the infallible sign of black clouds coming up against the wind. With sinking heart he hurried into the house.

Mr. Winstanley shared a dread of thunderstorms with many better men brave enough in other ways. While the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, he was in the grip of a sickening primitive terror which defied all reason. If it were evening, he would draw the curtains and turn on all the lights and put records of Wagner's heavier orchestral pieces on the gramophone, or else play as loudly as he could on his piano. In the daytime he had not the moral courage to adopt these remedies, lest he should lower himself in the eyes of his servants. He would cower in an armchair placed with its back to the windows, or he

would walk in the darkest passages of the house. Sometimes he shamed himself by putting a chair in front of an open wardrobe in his bedroom and sitting there bent forward with his head bowed behind the door.

What is the use of enlightenment and education if it does not preserve a man from behaving like this? Mr. Winstanley would bitterly ask himself the question after a storm had passed. Further, he would tell himself that during the next thunderstorm (here he touched wood) he would not demean himself like a terror-stricken and superstitious savage. Quite in vain was the resolve. Always it proved in vain.

When, therefore, Mr. Winstanley hurried indoors from the garden on this particular afternoon, he knew that he was in for a bad time. He made the usual ineffectual attempts to reassure himself. He recited all his charms.

*I am in no danger while I remain in the house. . . .*

*Air is the most efficient insulator known to science. Under immense strain even air breaks down and lightning bridges the gap. It is an interesting phenomenon in which I ought to take a detached interest. . . .*

*I once met a man from South Africa who told me that in Johannesburg they have a thunderstorm at least once a day. . . .*

*Lightning is due to a difference of potential between cloud and earth, or between cloud and cloud.*

## THE STORM BREAKS

*Aeroplanes wind in their trailing aerals when they pass into the region of a . . .*

The first flash of lightning suffused the landscape and illuminated the room and sent all the prophylactic tit-bits of scientific information scuttling out of Mr. Winstanley's head. His knees shook. He dropped into an armchair, automatically counting seconds. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . .* Then came a great clap of thunder which shook Mr. Winstanley's house and made Mr. Winstanley jump from his chair and go into the hall and walk upstairs . . . just for the sake of doing something. The storm was as yet a mile and a half away, he told himself. Things were not so bad. It might pass in the opposite direction.

The second flash of lightning flooded Mr. Winstanley's pale face and tinted it with all the colours of the rainbow, for he was passing under a stained-glass window on his staircase. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . God help me, it is getting nearer!* He trembled, and could neither go farther up the stairs nor come back, being in two minds. Upstairs there was a dark passage to which he often resorted on such occasions: but it might be safer in the cellar. Could he go down to the cellar? What would the servants think?

"I'm afraid we're in for a bad storm, sir." It was his housekeeper who was coming down the stairs after shutting the bedroom windows.

"It's fortunate for us we are in shelter," said Mr.

Winstanley. (*I wonder if my voice is trembling as much as I think it is. I hope she notices nothing.*) "By the way, you might let me have the keys of the cellar. (*Yes, the cellar is the best place.*) I want to see whether that port I saved from my grandfather's cellar is still in good condition. I had almost forgotten about it as I never touch it myself but . . . (*One . . . two . . . three . . . good God, it's getting worse and worse!*) . . . It occurred to me it might be rather nice to offer my aunt some on her last night here. (*Lucky I thought of that!*)"

Mr. Winstanley obtained the keys of the cellar and descended into its grateful darkness. Overhead the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled. In her room the housekeeper told a shrinking parlourmaid that she did not like thunderstorms any better than anybody else did, but she had to grin and bear them, and it was pitiful to see a grown man in such a state as Mr. Winstanley, poor gentleman. . . .

## 2

Mrs. Burwash had been busy all the morning, working patiently, methodically, overlooking nothing. She had scrubbed the little house from top to bottom and beaten the sitting-room carpet and laid it down again. She polished every piece of furniture until it reflected like a mirror. She hung clean curtains at the windows and filled the vases with fresh flowers. There was not a pan or a crock left dirty or out of

its allotted place on the kitchen dresser. The front doorstep gleamed as white as hearthstone could make it, and the latest weed had been uprooted from the border to the garden path. Mrs. Burwash worked from the early morning, and stayed not for food. At three o'clock she had finished, and she made a last tour of the house. Everything was spick and span: the beds in perfect order, clothes hung in wardrobes or folded neatly away in drawers, not a sign of untidiness anywhere. Mrs. Burwash was satisfied. Anyone could come into the house and she would not need to be ashamed of it.

She washed and tidied herself, and went downstairs and opened the front door and left it ajar. Then she shut herself in the kitchen. On the table she had already placed paper and pen and ink. She sat down and wrote. The gathering darkness made it difficult, but she was able to complete her task before it became necessary to light the lamp.

Mrs. Burwash took the paper to the window and read what she had written:

I have taken salts of lemon. There is enough money in the tin canister on the mantelpiece to pay for the funeral. I do not owe anything. I am sorry to have been a trouble to anybody.

She laid the sheet back on the red tablecloth and secured it there by placing the inkstand upon it. Then she went to the dresser and took down a bottle bearing a red label.



## 3

Miss Perks did not care a fig for thunderstorms, but she did not want to get wet. Therefore, when the first heavy drops began to fall, she made straight for the nearest shelter, which happened to be the doorway of the King's Arms. The bars were closed for the afternoon, but the main door of the hotel was unlocked and Miss Perks went in. As she stood in the passage, Charteris came hurrying from an inner room.

"I'm glad you're back. We're in for a storm, I'm afraid." Seeing the old lady, he stopped in his tracks and looked at her in surprise. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Perks. I thought it was my wife."

"I am afraid it is only myself," said Miss Perks. "I had no mackintosh or umbrella and I made bold to come in. I hope I do not intrude."

"Come in, do, please." The innkeeper was profuse in his hospitality. "I am very glad you did. Won't you come into the parlour? You will be more comfortable there."

"Yes, I will walk into your parlour," said Miss Perks. She stepped into a small room overcrowded with furniture and ornaments, as is the way of innkeeper's parlours. Individually it bore marks of the slatternliness that attended all Mrs. Charteris's housekeeping. The chair in which Miss Perks ensconced herself was comfortable enough, and she

congratulated herself on being where she was, rather than out-of-doors, where the rain was falling in sheets.

"I sincerely hope your wife has not been caught in this," remarked Miss Perks politely.

"I hope not indeed. I am very anxious about her. She went up to the farm to get some eggs and a chicken and she should be on her way back now. She is probably sheltering in one of the cottages on the lane."

"I expect she is. She will, if she has any sense," added Miss Perks, her tone implying considerable doubt on the point. "The Americans have a proverb, 'He's too big a fool to come in out of the rain.' How is she? Is her health still causing you anxiety?"

"I am afraid so. It fluctuates, you know." The innkeeper watched Miss Perks rather nervously. "One day she will have one of her fits of dizziness. The next she will appear to be all right: that is, as well as she ever is, which is not saying much. This morning she was not complaining so much as usual."

"That must have been a blessing. Now, Mr. Charteris, if you are not averse to leaving me alone, I should esteem it a favour if you would go on with whatever you were doing. The last thing I wish to do is to make myself a nuisance."

"You are very welcome, but . . ." Charteris was interrupted by the first flash of lightning. He waited for the thunder. "Yes, I'm very much afraid we're in for it. I sincerely hope my wife is safe

indoors somewhere. You are not nervous of thunderstorms, Miss Perks?"

"At my time of life?" The old lady snorted. "But you mustn't let me detain you. You were saying . . ."

"As a matter of fact I was rather busy stocktaking, and if you are quite sure you will be all right . . ."

They had to raise their voices now to make themselves heard.

"As right as . . . rain," shouted Miss Perks.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" shouted Charteris back. He stood in the doorway, obviously anxious to go, but detained by his native politeness.

"If you have such a thing as a crossword puzzle to keep me out of mischief . . ."

"Yes, certainly. Here is to-day's paper. I can't say whether it's a good puzzle. I never do them. That was a very heavy peal. I said I never do them. I don't know if it's a good puzzle."

"It will probably be good enough for me. Now go away, my good man, and get on with your job. Oh, have you a pencil? I said, Have . . . you . . . a . . . pencil? Really, Providence is making conversation unnecessarily difficult."

Charteris offered her a well-sharpened pencil which he took from his pocket, and, with further apologies, left her and closed the door.

"Prefix meaning 'half,'" with four letters. It might be 'demi' or 'semi,'" so soliloquized Miss Perks. "I am afraid this is one of those ridiculous

ones. Yes, it is. There's a prize offered. Pin a threehalfpenny stamp to the coupon. What fools people are! Come in. Come . . . in!"

A maid entered with a cup of tea.

"Mr. Charteris's compliments and he thought you might like this."

"It's very kind of him. Thank you." Miss Perks looked suspiciously at the dark liquid, of typical public-house strength. "You have upset most of it in the saucer, my girl."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. The lightning made me jump so. I'll get you some more."

"No, don't bother. This will probably be quite enough for me. I am much obliged to Mr. Charteris. Tell me, is there such a thing as a dictionary in the house? I said a dic . . . tion . . . ar . . . y. This is a most ill-mannered storm. No wonder the nations insist on continuing to rage so furiously together, when the heavens set them such an example."

"Yes, ma'am, I've seen a Chambers's Dictionary somewhere. I'll see if I can find it for you."

"That's very kind of you. Chambers's Dictionary. That's excellent. If you can lay your hands on it, child, do so. It will help me to solve this abominable crossword puzzle. But on no account worry your master about it, as he is very busy."

"'Insects,' beginning with E, seven letters?" mused Miss Perks, left alone again. "I don't know any insects beginning with E. I don't want to know

any insects beginning with E. I love my love with an E, because he's an entomologist: he took me to an emporium and bought me some emmets. No, that won't do. I can't make seven letters out of emmets, even if they are insects. I am becoming ridiculous. Will that girl succeed in finding Chambers's Dictionary, I wonder, and if so, will it be the right one? Interesting thought. Here she is. Thunder and lightning. Enter Cæsar . . . enter maid, bearing a work of reference."

"I found it, ma'am," said the girl triumphantly. "I didn't tell Mr. Charteris, but I got it from his . . ."

"I don't want to know where you got it from. I'm glad you've found it. Thank you, my child." The old lady accepted the volume and laid it negligently on the table.

The maid looked at her with admiration.

"I don't believe the thunder worries you a bit," she said.

"Not a bit. The lightning is more to be feared than the thunder, but even that doesn't distress me unduly."

"You must have a very good conscience," the girl ventured to say, rather pertly.

"An ossified conscience," said Miss Perks. "Thank you for getting me the dictionary. I said, thank . . . you . . . 'for getting . . . the . . . dictionary. Oh, she's gone. And now . . ."

Miss Perks opened the dictionary and looked with interest at the fly-leaf. There was the inscription in

pale ink and no attempt had been made to erase it. In a prim and precise hand the name was written: "Arthur Lovett."

"I love my love with an A because of his autograph," murmured Miss Perks. "But, there, I mustn't overwork my jokes."

She opened the book at random and at once found a folded sheet of notepaper. Without any compunction Miss Perks unfolded the sheet and read what was written:

DEAR SIR,

If you require any secretarial assistance at any time I shall be grateful if you would command my services.

Yours faithfully,

ARTHUR LOVETT.

"A perfunctory sort of application for work," commented Miss Perks, "and shows no respect for the Consecution of Tenses." She had seen that shaky handwriting before: evidently it was the hurried scrawl of a person labouring under great stress of mental agitation.

"But why," Miss Perks asked herself, as she folded the cheap notepaper and put it back where she had found it, "why should Lovett write to my nephew for a job? At that time, too, when he had far graver things to think about?" She went to the window and looked out. A flash of lightning offered her a dissolving view of the duck pond: it was succeeded

almost immediately by a great crash of thunder. "I think I understand," Miss Perks told herself calmly.

She noticed another window in the parlour. It was small and partly curtained and allowed anyone in the room to have a view of the bar. Miss Perks peeped, and saw Charteris standing by the shelves behind the counter. He was decanting a yellow liquid from a black bottle, and the expression on his face was very interesting to Miss Perks.

"He looks like . . ." Miss Perks could not recall the name. "Like that good-natured little man they caught by wireless. Some years ago. It made a stir at the time. He looks very much as that little man must have looked when he first made up his mind to . . ."

Miss Perks sighed and went back to her chair and Chambers's Dictionary. She turned over the leaves, and she held up the book by its covers and shook it. She found nothing else.

"I wonder," she thought, "if he kept the other letter. If so, no doubt it is in a safer place."

Picking up Charteris's pencil, Miss Perks settled down to her crossword puzzle. . . .

Probably nothing but a thunderstorm would have driven Mrs. Charteris within the walls of Rosemary Cottage. Possibly not even a thunderstorm would have caused her to risk the contamination of Mrs. Burwash's company had she retained her senses : but

a thunderstorm made Mrs. Charteris forget everything else and run madly for shelter.

She was coming down the lane with her basket on her arm, and she hurried because she had seen the black clouds advancing. She hoped to be home before the first onset of the storm, but a blinding flash of lightning overtook her and, screaming with fright, she bolted for the nearest cottage. She beat on the door with her fist and it opened. Glad enough to be inside, she still stood trembling from head to foot, and the successive flashes of the lightning set her heart hammering. She could not bear to be alone.

"Is there anybody in?" she cried. "I hope you won't mind me coming in. I'm terrified by thunderstorms. I can't endure them. Is there anybody in?"

Her voice was lost in the reverberating thunder. She slammed the front door to shut out the storm. The lightning lit up the passage: there was a small window at the side of the door. Mrs. Charteris's instinct was to find a dark place where she could hide from the lightning. She blundered forward. No, that was the parlour, that would not do. There must be a cupboard somewhere or some little room where she could cover up the source of light. Was there nobody in the house? She shouted again. No answer came except in that dreadful voice from above. What was this? The kitchen. Oh, there was somebody after all. Mrs. Charteris screamed



as the lightning came, and then shrieked in more desperate terror, for the lightning had shown her the body of Mrs. Burwash, lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, with her face contorted by the agony of a frightful death.

Mrs. Charteris ran out of the house into the full force of the storm. The lightning played around her as she fled like a mad thing down the lane, and at every flash she uttered cries of utter despair, but she battled on, soaked to the skin by the pitiless rain, until she staggered to the door of the King's Arms, and with a piercing shriek fell fainting across the threshold.

## CHAPTER XI

### ADVICE TO A HUSBAND

#### I

CHARTERIS came in where Miss Perks was sitting over her crossword puzzle. He looked at her in naïve admiration.

"You don't seem to mind the thunderstorm at all. It's beginning to unsettle me. I don't remember such a fierce one. I hope my wife is in shelter. How are you getting on?"

"I am held up for want of a letter."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I . . . am . . . held . . . up . . . for . . . want . . . of . . . a . . . letter. A letter! I must apologize for shouting. Yes, just for want of a letter," said Miss Perks thoughtfully, "I am held up in my tentative progress towards a solution."

"I expect you will find it shortly."

"I wonder. As you say, this is a remarkably fierce storm. It cannot be pleasant for those who are out in it. Tramps, for example, must find it excessively uncomfortable. Tramps and fugitives. Have you heard from Mr. Lovett lately?"

Charteris started. Was it the lightning, Miss Perks asked herself, or the abruptness of the question?

He answered quickly enough.

"Yes. He seems quite well and happy."

"There is a question I want to ask you about Mr. Lovett." Miss Perks tapped with Charteris's pencil on the table and leaned back, seeking the exact form of words. "I hope you won't mind my asking what may seem an indiscreet, perhaps even an impertinent question." She paused and noticed with satisfaction that Charteris waited for the question with a set and anxious face. "I was going to ask you if you still have Mr. Lovett's first letter. Oh, bless my soul, this is too much of a good thing!" . . . for the thunder had drowned her voice.

"Conversation is rather difficult," said Charteris, smiling palely. "You were asking me if I still had . . . ?"

"If you still had Mr. Lovett's . . . first . . . letter," repeated Miss Perks, watching him. "Mr. . . . Lovett's . . . What in the world is that?"

Charteris had run from the room at the sound of the dreadful shriek which followed the clap of thunder. A couple of maids who had been sitting nervously in their bedroom with the blinds drawn came hesitatingly down the stairs, crying out as they came. Miss Perks went into the passage. She saw Charteris half carrying, half dragging his wife through the main door. The woman was uncon-

scious and water ran from her soaked clothing. Charteris lifted her wholly in his arms and, staggering under the burden, for he was in poor condition, laid her on the sofa in the parlour.

"She's fainted," he said unnecessarily. "Don't stand there making that noise, you girls. You will have to carry your mistress to bed in a minute. I will get her something."

It seemed to Miss Perks that he had rehearsed this situation. He seemed in no doubt as to what he must do. He went to the shelves in the bar where he had been at work a little while before, and picked up a glass which contained some yellow liquid. Miss Perks noticed particularly that the glass and its contents were there all ready to his hand. He returned immediately to the parlour and bent down beside the prostrate form of his wife. He put the glass to her lips, saying, as if she had been able to hear him, "Drink this. It will do you good."

At this moment Miss Perks intervened. She snatched the glass from Charteris and spilled the contents on the floor. He started back and looked at her in consternation.

"Let me attend to this," said Miss Perks in a perfectly calm, masterful voice. "This is a woman's job. You girls are great strapping wenches. You can carry Mrs. Charteris up to her bedroom. Come along now. This is an urgent matter. There is no time for nonsense."

By her authority she forced them to stop their

foolish weeping and become useful. The storm was abating, but fitful flashes of lightning still played round the inn as they carried their mistress upstairs and undressed her and put her to bed.

"Now then," said Miss Perks briskly. "Anna" . . . she had become possessed of their names . . . "two hot-water bottles, really hot, as quickly as possible. Rosa, bring plenty of milk: no, the milk has probably curdled. Anything would curdle in this weather. Beat up the whites of two eggs in a glass of water. You can do that? Well, hurry."

The maids went scurrying downstairs. Miss Perks made sure there were sufficient blankets on the bed, and then opened the window and sat down and waited. . . .

Charteris, in the parlour, looked at the spilt liquid on the floor. The glass was on the table. He picked it up, smelt it, opened the window, and flung it into the storm. He shut the window and stood motionless. There was a faint smile on his face.

He might have stood there for ten minutes when Anna came breathless into the room. He wheeled sharply.

"Oh, sir! "

"What is it, Anna? Is your mistress . . ."

"Miss Perks says Mrs. Charteris is much better now, sir," the girl gasped out.

"Oh!" said Charteris dully. Then, recovering himself, he said with unusual sharpness, "Then, what is it? What's all the fuss about?"

"Oh, sir, Miss Perks says will you ring up the doctor and the police."

"What!" He was shouting. "You said your mistress was all right?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, sir. It's Mrs. Burwash. She's taken poison and she may be dead by now."

Charteris turned white. Suddenly he walked quickly from the room, entered the passage, and went to the telephone.

2

"Yes, I think she'll live through the night," said Miss Perks, sitting down again in the parlour arm-chair and smiling agreeably. "She's sleeping peacefully now. No need to fetch Prout. He's probably busy elsewhere."

"You've been very good," said Charteris. He was pouring out whisky. "I don't often drink at this time of day, but the shock upset me. May I offer you a little?"

"Thank you. I will have a little whisky. Quite plain, please: with plenty of water but nothing else." Miss Perks showed her teeth as she grinned. "Just pure whisky and pure water."

"Here you are." Charteris pushed the glass towards her. He left her to add the water herself. Miss Perks noticed that he drank his own neat. He gulped down a couple of inches of the stuff and dropped into a chair. Miss Perks added a large quantity of water to her own glass and sipped.

"It seems all right," she said, with the air of a

connoisseur. "I have often wondered what the sensations were of those unfortunate individuals whom the medieval princes kept to taste the food and drinks in case they were poisoned. I can imagine circumstances when they would be distinctly nervous. When their masters were dining with the Medicis, for example."

Charteris was watching her. Miss Perks, in one of her country rambles, had once come across a little party of foxes who had caught a rabbit and were playing with it, passing it from one to the other. The expression in Charteris's eyes was not unlike that in the eyes of the rabbit.

"She went into the house, poor thing," said Miss Perks suddenly, "not knowing whose house it was. Mrs. Burwash had taken salts of lemon. She was lying dead in the kitchen. A shock for your unfortunate wife!"

Charteris said nothing. Miss Perks sipped again at her much diluted whisky.

"It was a dreadful death to die," added Miss Perks. "A century ago . . . or less, perhaps . . . people would wag solemn heads and say that it shows where that kind of life leads to. They would possibly add that it was the best thing she could do, poor wretch. And now there are plenty of young men with little pointed beards who will tell you that Mrs. Burwash was victimized by the capitalist system and that all of us are morally responsible for her death."

Charteris was still staring at her dumbly.

"I might have done something myself to help her," said Miss Perks quietly, as though to herself. "I had the chance. And yet . . . well, it doesn't do, you know. It never does. People can only help themselves. Still, I could have wished that she had not taken poison, or . . . There are poisons and poisons. Why take salts of lemon? One need not die in agony. There are pleasanter ways of dying. Poor thing, driven to extremities, and able to think only of the poison bottle on the kitchen dresser as a possible way out!"

Miss Perks drew herself up and added, as if she were refuting a malicious charge brought by an opponent, "I am not being sentimental. There is no sentiment in me. I am only thinking what waste and muddle it all is. I wonder what I should have done if I had been in her position. Poison myself? No. Yet, if I had wished to, I should have done it in a more efficient way. Inefficient . . . that is the whole explanation of people like Mrs. Burwash. They cannot adjust themselves to the world. They don't realize that life is a battle. They always choose what looks like the easiest way, and, as always, the easiest way proves to be the most difficult and the cruellest way. . . . I am talking too much. This will never do."

"You were asking me a question a little while ago," said Charteris abruptly. "What was it?"

Miss Perks studied for a minute before replying.

"We'd better have it out," she said with resolution.



"It's a question of a letter. Have you still got the first letter Mr. Lovett wrote to you?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You would say that," retorted Miss Perks impatiently. "Please don't trouble to say things like that. I wanted a dictionary just now and I . . . and this Chambers's was handy. Inside it was a note from Mr. Lovett asking you for secretarial work. A formal little letter. Why should your friend Lovett write you a formal little letter . . . 'Dear Sir,' and so on . . . asking you for secretarial work?"

"Personally I don't read letters addressed to other people," said Charteris in a tone of mild reproof.

"Don't waste time saying things like that, please. It gets us nowhere. As a matter of fact, of course, when you read that letter you were reading a letter meant for somebody else. Your friend Lovett was so absent-minded. That letter was intended for Mr. Winstanley. As your friend Lovett has the engaging habit of putting his letters into the wrong envelopes, it follows that Mr. Winstanley received a letter intended for you. He read it, and so did I."

"Lovett was certainly very careless," said the mild-mannered publican. "Still, I don't see how I could be expected to know that the letter asking for a job was meant for Mr. Winstanley. Of course I should have sent it on to Mr. Winstanley if I had known."

"Of course." Miss Perks snapped her fingers to indicate that the matter was of no importance. "It's the other letter I was asking you about. Now don't

say, 'What other letter?' I'm doing my best to keep cool and be polite." Since Charteris did not answer, she went on, "Perhaps you would like to know what your friend Lovett said in his second letter . . . the one he meant for you and posted to my nephew. So far as I can remember, it ran like this: 'I forgot to tell you where to find it. It's behind Chambers's. If I were you I should borrow the dictionary as well as the other book. This will be an excuse for going to my room. You can explain that I said you could borrow them.' That was all. He just initialled it 'A.'"

"Well?" said Charteris politely.

"Well!" mimicked Miss Perks. "If you are not going to be helpful I shall find myself losing my temper presently, and I dislike losing my temper. It's so lowering to the dignity. You might be a little more forthcoming. You might admit to having received the first letter he wrote. It is quite obvious that you did, because you went to your friend Lovett's room and borrowed the books. Apart from the fact that anybody else who happened to get such a letter would have taken it to the police."

"Lovett asked me to keep his secret."

"Are you so squeamish in a matter of life and death?"

"What makes you think it was a matter of life and death?"

Miss Perks grunted. "Since we are asking each other questions," she said, "here's another. What

was it you found where your friend Lovett said you would find it . . . behind Chambers's Dictionary?"

"That's a private matter."

"Oh! Well, if you don't intend to tell me . . ."  
Miss Perks's tone grew very fierce. "I want to know what you did with that first letter. Have you destroyed it?"

"Why should I destroy it?"

"I hope you haven't destroyed it. It would be a valuable piece of evidence." Miss Perks put her finger-tips together and, leaning forward, glared at Charteris. "I suppose you wouldn't like to see that man Speakman's death fastened on some innocent person?"

"Speakman's death!" Charteris, without pretence, was plainly astounded. "What on earth has Speakman's death to do with it?"

"My good man," said Miss Perks, back in the classroom, "have I really got to explain the most elementary things to you over and over again? Surely you have heard the rumours. Surely you know that for a week now people have been saying that Speakman was poisoned. To which I can add the interesting detail that the police propose to exhume his body." ("Yes, I think I am justified in adding that," said Miss Perks to herself.)

"I heard the rumours, but I never took them seriously. In any case I still cannot see what they have to do with Lovett."

"If I am not in my second childhood," said Miss

Perks with emphasis, "they have everything to do with your friend Lovett and the letter he wrote to you. That letter is probably just the piece of evidence that will save the situation. If that man Speakman's body is exhumed and the jury find that he died from poison administered by some person or persons unknown . . ."

"Well? Supposing they do . . ."

"Well, do you think it will be nice for Mrs. Partridge to know that everybody believes her husband was a murderer?"

Miss Perks looked at her man with satisfaction. That shot, she reflected, had hit him between wind and water.

"No," he said in a stifled voice, "it wouldn't."

"So the question is," continued Miss Perks triumphantly, "whether Mrs. Partridge's friends have to go down to the Mile End Road, or wherever it is, to seek this man Lovett, which means that you will probably find yourself in the witness-box and rather hard put to it for a reason to explain your conduct . . . or whether . . ."

"Yes?"

"Or whether you will produce this letter, which will save Mrs. Partridge from having her late husband's name dragged into the coroner's court at all."

"You seem to know a great deal about what is in that letter." Charteris's tone was not sarcastic.

"Yes," said Miss Perks, with a smile. "I have been giving the matter a good deal of thought."

The innkeeper sat with his head in his hands. The sun shone now and Miss Perks could see the rain steaming from the roof of a cottage opposite. She looked at her watch.

Charteris stood up.

"Two minutes thirty-five seconds," said the old lady to herself. "Has he made up his mind?"

"I have been a fool," said Charteris suddenly.

"I dare say you have. We are all fools at times, some more than others, but none of us has a clean record."

Charteris, paying no attention, had taken his keys from his trousers pocket, and was unlocking a drawer in the sideboard.

"There," he said, tossing her a letter, "that's what you want." He hesitated a moment. "I'll go up and see how my wife is getting on."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," retorted Miss Perks with determination. "You'll sit down there until I've read this letter."

He sat down and fell back into his former posture, holding his head in his hands.

Miss Perks gave him one glance before she set herself to deciphering the straggling, nervous writing that sprawled across the cheap notepaper. She read:

DEAR JACK,

By the time you receive this I expect to be at the end of my troubles. As you know, I lost my job as dispenser to Doctor Prout through my cursed

## ADVICE TO A HUSBAND

absent-mindedness. I cannot expect to find anything else and I have decided to abandon the struggle.

As soon as I have posted this letter I shall take a dose of conium, which I have prepared myself from the plant called the Poison Hemlock. The action is fairly rapid, I believe. I shall go out at once and stumble in front of a motor-car, so that there shall be no suspicion of suicide. I am doing this for Helen's sake. She will know nothing now, but she might find out when she is older, and I should not like her to think that her father killed himself.

For the same reason I am asking you to do me one last favour. Will you go to my room and take the conium bottle away and dispose of it? Remember it contains deadly poison. The bottle is labelled with a large C. I cannot take it with me for obvious reasons and if it remains in my room it may fall into careless hands and cause trouble.

I wish you to take my "British Herbal" as a memento of me.

That's all, Jack. Thank you, and the best of luck. I shall trust you to keep my secret.

ARTHUR LOVETT.

"Thank you," said Miss Perks calmly. "Will you keep this or shall I? Obviously it must on no account be destroyed. You understand now, don't you?"

Charteris got up, took the letter, put it back in the place from which he had taken it, and locked the drawer.

"Well, so much for that." Miss Perks smiled. "For the present, I mean. We may come back to it later. We shall have to. . . . As for the last letter you received from your friend Lovett, I don't think I need ask you to let me see it. I can imagine what it contains. It reports a succession of miracles. He threw himself in front of a car, and the car pulled up in time. He flung himself over a precipice, and was marvellously uninjured. Finally, the poison which he had taken produced no effect. He decided that Providence had intervened, and that he was being reserved for higher things. He thereupon resolved to dedicate himself to religion. Now he is fervently preaching to the dockers of the East End. Is that about the gist of it?"

Charteris lifted his head and looked at the old lady with naïve admiration. "Really, I don't know how you manage to guess things like you do."

"As you do," corrected the ex-schoolmistress. "Anybody can guess. The question is whether I have guessed right."

"You might have read the letter."

Miss Perks grunted. There was silence for a minute or two.

"With regard to that bottle labelled with a large C," said Miss Perks at length, "and containing deadly poison . . ."

She paused. The children were playing by the duck-pond: she could hear their shouts. She thought of Partridge.

"I have thrown the poison away and destroyed the bottle," said Charteris. "Naturally. What would you expect me to do? You can't keep a thing like that about the house."

"It might come in useful."

He looked at her, and said nothing.

Miss Perks began again as though he had never spoken.

"With regard to that bottle labelled with a large C, and containing a deadly poison," she repeated, "what shall we do? Dispose of it, as requested by your friend Lovett? Or keep it for the benefit of the police? Exhibit A."

"I told you," said Charteris stubbornly. "I threw the poison away and destroyed the bottle."

"You ought not to say things like that," remarked Miss Perks coolly. "Lies lead people into trouble. 'Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive,' as the poet remarked."

"Very well. Have it your own way."

"The rain has been over for some time" . . . Miss Perks glanced casually out of the window . . . "and really I ought to have been away long ago. I shall be off in a few minutes now. I am leaving for home to-morrow and probably we shall never see each other again. Before we part, I have something to say to you. Now, sit down. . . . That's right. Take some



more whisky if you like, and then sit still. You need not say anything. If I were you, I shouldn't."

Charteris poured out half a glass of whisky and raised it to his lips. He put it down untasted and looked at her with an expression that in so mild a man might have been interpreted as intended to be defiant.

"Go on," he said, settling in his chair.

"I'm going on. I'm going to say some hard things, and, really, my advice to you not to answer is advice you will do well to take. You may say something that might be used in evidence against you afterwards. I am not joking." She went on, "This legacy of a man who thought he was going to die . . . this bottle labelled with a large C and supposed to contain a deadly poison . . . was a dangerous thing to send into the midst of a household like yours. It promptly put ideas into your head. You fought with them for some time, but they obsessed you, and you grew frightened. You went so far as to tell Partridge to keep away from your premises, because you feared you might be led to tamper with his drinks. Don't interrupt!"

Charteris lowered his head but watched her through eyes that reminded her again of the rabbit she had seen tormented by the foxes.

"Then you reasoned with yourself. You said that since your friend Lovett had not died, the stuff was probably not poisonous after all. He had probably made a mistake: perhaps put the label on the wrong

bottle. That was the sort of thing your friend Lovett did. Or perhaps he did not know so much about his herbs as he thought he did, and had mistaken something else for the Poison Hemlock he thought he had found. A hundred things might have gone wrong. However, it was easy to make a test. There would be no great harm in trying a certain experiment."

Charteris reached out a hand for the whisky and gulped some down.

"I must say," said Miss Perks, "that I have a certain amount of sympathy with you. Anybody would who had met your wife. I know more than one person who has said that if he were married to such a creature he would poison her. . . . Pull yourself together, man. Whisky costs twelve and six a bottle: you can't afford to upset the stuff. . . . People do talk like that. It is easy to talk. It is quite another matter to practise. Then you are courting danger and running a strong risk of meeting a shameful and probably not altogether painless death."

"My God," said Charteris, "must I listen to this?"

"You must. Whose fault is it? . . . Well, as I was saying, you are married to a woman who must be a constant temptation to a man who is so unfortunate as to be saddled with a bottle which possibly contains a deadly poison. But people don't seek a release from the marriage bond with so much fervour as to think seriously of poisoning their partner unless there is an added outside inducement. In your case, there was Mrs. Partridge."

"I won't . . . I won't . . ."

"Sit down!"

"I won't. I won't listen to it."

"You will," said Miss Perks grimly. "Or else the County Police will. Which do you prefer? You can choose. . . . That's right. Sit down and take some more whisky. Steady, now! Don't spill it. . . . You very much admired Mrs. Partridge, and with some justice, for she is a fine woman. The only drawback to loving Mrs. Partridge was that you were expected to love that . . . that most unseemly and not-to-be-regretted dog of hers. You decided that you wanted Mrs. Partridge. You did not consult her views, but that was a matter of form, to be attended to later. There were two obstacles in the way. You were married, admittedly to a very unpleasant wife. She was married, admittedly to a worthless husband. At this point, meditating on these things, you began to see where your ideas were leading you. It was then that you wrote to Partridge and told him you would not have him any more in the King's Arms. A queer way for a licensed victualler to behave! No wonder I began to . . ." Miss Perks bit her lip. "Never mind what I began to . . . Then you had your doubts about the value of the stuff in the bottle labelled C. Well, your eyes fell upon the deplorable dog made so much, too much, of by Mrs. Partridge. An experiment in that direction would at the worst do no more than remove an animal that was an offence to all except its mistress

and a burden to itself. You gave the brute a small quantity of the Lovett preparation. The dog died."

Charteris groaned and buried his head in his hands.

"Yes, you know what is coming," thought Miss Perks. She continued steadily, "You knew then that the stuff was as poisonous as Lovett had intended it to be. When you heard that Partridge had been killed in Helmstone, it seemed that your way was clear. The only obstacle was your wife, and she was so obviously in a poor state of health and complained so much and so often that nobody would be surprised if she got worse and died. You could not muster up sufficient determination. You gave her small diluted doses and they only had the effect of causing fits of dizziness. You could not bring yourself to administer the *coup de grâce*. Perhaps you had intended to do it to-day when you had been wrought to a pitch of desperation. I have noticed that thunderstorms have queer effects on the nerves of some people. There are those who betray their fear and there are others who remain outwardly cool but inwardly are very near breaking-point. That may be fanciful, but I believe you were very near the brink of insanity this afternoon. At any rate, I feel I was justified when I stopped you from giving that drink to your wife. I will not ask you if I am right."

Miss Perks was silent.

Presently Charteris stood up and looked at her sullenly.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he mumbled.

"Nothing," said Miss Perks, standing up too. "I can't see that it would do anybody any good to drag the police into it. You'll be punished without their help. There is such a thing as poetic justice. After I have gone you will pour the contents of that bottle down the drains . . . or whatever substitute you have for drains in these primitive parts . . . and as they go you will reflect upon the years that stretch before you . . . long weary years in which you will be dreeing your weird with Mrs. Charteris beside you, saved, though she will not know it, from an untimely grave . . . still in very poor health but, for a long time to come, I fear, in complete possession of her powers of speech. It's sad for you. . . . And now I must be off. My nephew will wonder what in the world has become of me."

Charteris automatically conducted her to the front door. Miss Perks stood there for a moment sniffing the fresh air. The world smelt very sweet after the storm. "If only people would let it alone!" she heard herself murmuring aloud.

If Charteris had been alive to anything beside his own dejected thoughts, he might have wondered at this remark: but at the moment he was beyond realizing what was said.

"Well, good-bye," she added, turning to him. "I am an old woman. We shan't see each other again. Be a man and keep a stiff upper lip . . . and don't

forget to pour the contents of that bottle down the drains."

She gripped her ebony cane and walked slowly away.

Charteris stood watching her pass down the village street. After a little while he went upstairs to inquire after his wife. He found her sleeping.

"Rosa," he said to the girl in the room, "we must do something for your mistress. We must find her the best doctor and do whatever he recommends."

"Yes, sir," said Rosa. "It is dreadful to see her always so ill."

"We can't go on like this," said Charteris quietly. "Perhaps the doctor will suggest a change of air."

"I'm sure that would be very nice, sir," said Rosa.

## CHAPTER XII

### MISS PERKS TAKES PORT

#### I

ON this, the last day of Miss Perks's visit, Mr. Winstanley had again invited the Vicar to dinner. Why he had done so he could hardly have explained. At the back of his mind was possibly the unworthy thought that his aunt would seize this final opportunity for some parting shots . . . digs at his old-maidish habits and his scrupulous dieting . . . and the presence of a representative of the Church might be trusted to turn her fire in another direction.

As it happened, the meal was a very peaceful affair. Scarcely a word was spoken. The Vicar appeared to have something on his mind. Mr. Winstanley supposed that the tragic affair at Rosemary Cottage had shocked him deeply. Mr. Winstanley himself had been greatly moved to hear of Mrs. Burwash's suicide. He had liked the woman in spite of what she was; and after all, she was still young, and it was a dreadful death to die. In one of his own houses, too! All this murder and sudden death appalled Mr. Winstan-

ley. A curse was upon the village. There had been nothing but evil since Helmstone had turned its baleful eye upon the place.

Mr. Winstanley came out of his gloomy meditations on murder and motor tracks to look askance at his aunt. She was eating as heartily as usual . . . she was a great trencherwoman . . . but she had nothing whatever to say. That was an exceedingly odd state of affairs. Perhaps she was thinking of her approaching return home, and wondering how Robert had been behaving himself, and whether she would find that Ramsay MacDonald the parrot had been properly looked after by William and Mary. Perhaps she had heard the sad news about Mrs. Burwash . . . Mr. Winstanley had done his best to keep it from her . . . he had warned the servants not to mention it . . . and it had distressed her. Mr. Winstanley remembered that his aunt had made the acquaintance of the wretched woman and had liked her sufficiently to speak up for her. Perhaps . . .

Mr. Winstanley had done with his perhapses. He didn't know what to make of it. Upon his soul he didn't.

Towards the end of the meal the maid whispered something in Mr. Winstanley's ear and he brightened perceptibly. He nodded and the girl brought him a decanter.

"I don't think you knew my grandfather, Vicar," he said, with a touch of pomposity befitting the



subject. "He was one of the old school. He kept a cellar. Not much of it remains, and needless to say that since I inherited it I have made no additions. For a long time I have never even given a thought to it. To-day, however, it came back to my memory that there were still surviving a few dozen of a port which, according to my dear father, is of a very superior vintage. As this is a special occasion" . . . Mr. Winstanley bowed courteously towards his aunt . . . "it occurred to me that we might open a bottle. I decanted some and I hope you will try it and let me have your opinion, for I am no connoisseur. I trust the wine has kept well and is not . . . er, corked."

He drew the Vicar's glass towards him.

"Ladies first," said the Vicar politely.

"Nonsense." Miss Perks awoke from her long silence. "It must go round with the sun. I thought everybody knew that."

"Of course. Dear me, I should have remembered that. Yes," added the Vicar whimsically, "to send the port round widdershins would be flying in the face of all seemly tradition. Thank you, Winstanley. It looks like the real Mackay. A lovely colour. But you are having some yourself, surely?"

"Well . . ." Mr. Winstanley hesitated.

"Don't be a fool, Herbert," said his aunt good-humouredly. "Of course you are."

"You must join me in drinking the health of your excellent aunt," urged the Vicar.

"Your excellent aunt will be highly offended if you don't. Port is a man's drink, Herbert. I should like to see you playing the man's part."

"Well, since this is a very exceptional occasion . . ." Mr. Winstanley allowed himself to be persuaded: reflecting none the less as he half-filled his glass with the ruby drops of the specious liquid, that he would have to pay for the dissipation on the morrow. "And now," he added, remembering his duty, "I lift my glass, aunt, wishing you many years of happiness."

"And a speedy return for another visit to our Downland village," added the Vicar.

"Thank you, Herbert. Thank you, Vicar. As to a speedy return, I will say nothing. As to many years of happiness, I neither expect nor deserve to have them, but I thank you all the same."

"What do you think of it?" asked Mr. Winstanley anxiously.

"Most excellent, my dear Winstanley. It is very well matured and most gratifying to the palate."

"I am only sorry, Herbert, that you did not remember its existence earlier."

"It certainly has quality," said their host reluctantly, "but I imagine it is not a wine of which one should drink other than sparingly, as the effects are probably potent, and the after-effects almost inevitably distressing."

"Fiddlesticks, Herbert. Your military ancestor, of whose portrait you are so proud, would have drunk

three bottles in one evening and thought nothing of it."

"He died young," reflected Mr. Winstanley. "He was only thirty-nine when he was killed in action."

"I don't follow your reasoning, Herbert. What has an early death in action to do with an addiction to port?"

"Possibly your good nephew feels that a less strenuous addiction to port would have rendered him more agile and apter at dodging bullets," put in the Vicar good-humouredly. "Excellent stuff, this, my dear Winstanley. Excellent stuff."

Mr. Winstanley looked apprehensively at the Vicar's already empty glass. "You won't, I suppose, Vicar, care to risk a little more?"

"On the contrary, I will cheerfully face the risk, my dear Winstanley."

Mr. Winstanley dubiously unstopped the decanter.

"And you, aunt?"

"Thank you, Herbert," said Miss Perks, her eyes twinkling. "I am just beginning to enjoy it. . . ."

Mr. Winstanley's housekeeper looked at the clock twenty minutes later.

"They're sitting a long time over their dinner to-night," she said.

Mr. Winstanley allowed himself to be mocked, cajoled and bullied into taking no fewer than three glasses of the wonderful port. He sat in the drawing-room afterwards with his mind considerably confused. The wine had its effect upon virgin soil . . . Mr. Winstanley had touched nothing alcoholic for ten years . . . and somewhat clouded the faculties. At the same time his conscience pricked him, while even an unaccustomed sense of general well-being was not untroubled by thoughts of the Nemesis that awaited him on the morrow. Afterwards the extraordinary monologue delivered by his aunt on that occasion came back to him like something fantastic which had occurred to him in a dream. He found it difficult to believe that things had happened like that at all. He suspected the port: he distrusted his memory. And yet . . .

He had emerged from a sort of half-dozed to hear his aunt utter the name "Speakman." He distinctly remembered . . . there could be no illusion about this . . . he very distinctly remembered the look of pain that came over the Vicar's face at the word, the deprecating gesture of the Vicar's hand. Then . . . or so his blurred memory had it . . . Miss Perks began her extraordinary harangue.

Harangue was the word for it, because his aunt was . . . or had all the air of . . . making a formal

speech. Yet she did not seem to be addressing them. She sat in her armchair by the fireplace and spoke as though she were arguing something with herself, uttering her speculations aloud, clarifying her own mind. She was fully aware of their presence, none the less, and when from time to time the Vicar ventured to interrupt, he received short shrift.

"We have got to make up our minds about the case of this man Speakman." So she began: her head bent slightly upwards, her shrewd eyes fixed on some distant imaginary point, her hands clasped in her lap.

The Vicar moved uncomfortably.

"My dear Miss Perks . . ."

Miss Perks frowned. "We have got to make up our minds about the case of this man Speakman," she repeated, "and we must not be deterred by the conventional timidity of those who by long custom have lost all desire to face the facts. Was he murdered? If so, was he poisoned? Current rumour in the village has for some time insisted that he was."

Even in Mr. Winstanley's dimmed vision the Vicar appeared noticeably distressed, but he kept a hold on himself, and said no more for the present.

"If current rumour in the village insists that the man Speakman was poisoned," resumed Miss Perks, "common sense and long experience would suggest that poisoned he certainly was not. Yet for once I fancy current rumour has got hold of the right end of the stick. The man Speakman said himself, as

he was dying in the church, that somebody had poisoned him, and I believe for several reasons that he was right."

Miss Perks glared at the Vicar, whom she suspected of another attempt to dam the channels of her discourse, and went on with truculence: "You may say, and with some justice, that if such a man as this man Speakman did actually meet his death by poisoning, does it really matter? That is a sensible question. For myself I can only see two points of view from which it matters. The first is that some innocent person may be implicated unless we arrive at the truth. The second, unfashionable, perhaps, is that the truth is always a good thing to arrive at for its own sake.

"Very well, then, let us see if we can arrive at the truth. We don't know what Speakman had done or eaten or drunk in the early part of that day, but we do know what happened after he arrived in this village. He lunched with some of his fellow-conspirators from Helmstone after inspecting the site of the proposed motor-racing track. This was at the King's Arms. It is not likely that he was poisoned during that meal, because nobody else was affected. Afterwards he called at this house and had one of the heart attacks to which he was subject. It was not severe, and he felt better after taking a glass of the brandy that my nephew keeps locked up in his study."

Mr. Winstanley started. He had forgotten that

episode of the brandy, nor did he know that his aunt was aware of the existence of that hiding-place. Upon his soul! He had given Speakman brandy, and in any investigation he might easily find himself a suspected person. The very notion made him feel hot. He ran a finger round his neck inside his collar, which had suddenly grown uncomfortably tight.

"I think we may acquit my nephew of any intent to poison his guest," said Miss Perks sardonically; and Mr. Winstanley started at her words and blushed: yet heard them with relief. "Even such a guest as that man Speakman, with his passion for motor tracks," she added. "Yes, I think we may assume that he was not poisoned under this roof. Now, in company with the man Speakman, we return to the King's Arms. He spent some twenty minutes in the saloon bar, and it is reasonable to suppose that he took some further stimulant. It is altogether unlikely that this was the fatal drink: consumed as it was in company and on an unprepared occasion." Miss Perks stopped and scowled. "I must apologize for a piece of intellectual dishonesty. I was giving fallacious arguments to support what I know to be true. As a matter of fact, the fatal drink was actually consumed in company and on an unprepared occasion. We are coming to that. The next scene is Mrs. Waddell's boarding-house, where the man Speakman went to see his daughter, who, however, was out. This is the crux of the story, and we

must consider exactly what happened with the minutest care."

Mr. Winstanley, peering through a vinous haze, saw a slight change in the blurred contour of the Vicar: he had probably turned his head to glance at the glass-domed clock. Miss Perks went on remorselessly.

"There was some talk about Lovett, whom he met as he entered the house. Then Mrs. Waddell persuaded the man Speakman to try some of her dandelion wine. He consented against his will, and after a little further talk he went away, promising to come back at tea-time. In the village he began to feel unwell. He went into the church to sit down and rest. There he encountered his son-in-law Partridge, who was up to his monkey tricks on the bells. Partridge, who had been waiting for such an opportunity of seeing his father-in-law alone, promptly demanded money. There was no answer. Partridge raised his voice and threatened, and laid his hand on the other man's shoulder. The man Speakman collapsed in a heap. Partridge bent over him and heard him gasp out, 'They've poisoned me.' Then he appeared to relapse into a state of coma. He was breathing very heavily and his pupils were dilated. Partridge was badly scared and behaved foolishly: but that is neither here nor there. The point is that the man Speakman had been poisoned, and poisoned at Mrs. Waddell's."

The Vicar felt bound to remonstrate at this point.



"My dear Miss Perks, do you think it is really wise to say such things? That Councillor Speakman was poisoned may or may not be true. I for one am most reluctant to believe it. None the less, there is the possibility. We must await . . ." The Vicar became confused and stopped. Then, frowning, he added, "But to suggest that he was poisoned by Mrs. Waddell's dandelion wine . . . Well!"

"Alcohol has the strangest effect upon people," Mr. Winstanley heard an unfamiliar voice say. It came to him as a shock to realize that it was his own voice. "That port!" he added, by way of extenuation.

The others took no notice. Possibly Mr. Winstanley's remarks had been inaudible outside his immediate vicinity.

"Fiddlesticks!" Miss Perks retorted, addressing the Vicar. "I am not suggesting that the man Speakman was poisoned by Mrs. Waddell's dandelion wine. If you will be good enough to listen and refrain from interruptions, you will not jump at erroneous conclusions. Let us consider Lovett, and how he comes into this affair. I would remind you that Lovett is still in existence, and, if need arises, it will be readily possible to call him as witness, although, certainly, it is more than likely that he will have completely forgotten all that happened. As you know, he is a very absent-minded person. His forgetfulness had lost him his job as dispenser to Prout, in any case an ambiguous position for a man

who was known to be crazy about herbs, which he had a passion for collecting and boiling down into medicines. He was clever at this, and could disguise the taste of his most unpleasant weeds so that his noxious brews were not unpalatable. On this day of the man Speakman's death, Lovett was in a strange state of mind. He was making his preparations for suicide."

Catching the ominous word, Mr. Winstanley thought of Mrs. Burwash, and winced. He heard the Vicar coughing in the middle distance.

"He had prepared a large bottle of deadly poison. Before taking a dose, he wrote a letter to an intimate friend, explaining what he intended to do. He went out and posted this letter. When he came back it occurred to him that he had not been explicit enough in what he had written, and he sat down and penned a hasty note, a sort of postscript. Then he had what I believe you, Vicar, in your more facetious moments would call a brain-wave. He did not wish it to appear that he was committing suicide. He had, elsewhere, a young daughter: and this, at any rate, is to Lovett's credit, that he did not wish his child to grow up in the belief that her father had killed himself. In order, therefore, to show that he was in his right mind . . . that he was not disheartened by his misfortunes, but was still making an effort to find work . . . he wrote another note: this time to my nephew, asking for secretarial employment."

Mr. Winstanley, vaguely understanding himself to

be called in question, and wishing to be kept out of what appeared to be an unpleasant business, said, quite emphatically, "You are under a misapprehension, aunt. I never received such a note."

"No," said Miss Perks, with a little note of triumph in her voice. "You never received it, and precisely because our friend Lovett was so absent-minded. He put the notes in the wrong envelopes, and what you received was the postscript intended for the other person. You probably remember it: a communication signed 'A.,' containing a reference to Chambers's Dictionary. It puzzled you very much when you read it at breakfast."

"I remember it did," said Mr. Winstanley. He was quite pleased to find his mind clear on this point at least. "Yes, aunt, I remember it did. Upon my soul, I didn't know what to make of it at all."

"Well, now you know. So let us proceed. Having put the notes into the wrong envelopes, our friend Lovett made a journey to the post again. He came back. He would now drink his poison and then, as soon as possible, step under the wheels of a motor-car. Then, of course, the verdict would be Accidental Death, and the jury, acquitting the driver of all blame, would wish to associate themselves with the Coroner's comments on the perils of the roads. However, he needed a glass. He went downstairs to the kitchen and asked Mrs. Waddell for one. She promised to bring one up, and, being a kindly soul, as landladies go, she also brought up a glass of dande-

lion wine, having noticed that Lovett was moody and depressed, and thinking a little homely stimulant would do him good. When she had gone, Lovett took his dose, rinsed out the glass, and returned the tray to the kitchen. He was delayed in conversation by Mrs. Waddell, but the arrival of the man Speakman gave him the chance of slipping away. He stumbled in front of Prout's car, which happened to be the first one he met, and Prout skidded . . . I believe that is the term . . . and missed him. He next threw himself over a steep place on the hills, and was again miraculously saved. It then began to dawn upon his muddled brain that the poison was having no effect. He went to Helmstone, and then to London, and is now an evangelist, or some such thing, at the Cheerioh Mission, or some such place, not far from the Docks."

Miss Perks paused, and waited for the Vicar to open his mouth. None the less, as soon as the Vicar tried to get out a word, she was off again.

"You are going to say, Vicar, that this goes to show that the stuff in the bottle was not a deadly poison at all: that our friend Lovett did not know so much about the properties of plants as he thought he did, or that, in his absent-mindedness, he had used the wrong ingredients. There is no truth, unfortunately, in that argument: for part of the contents of that bottle have since been administered to a dog, and the dog duly died after a very short interval."

"Mrs. Partridge's dog!" exclaimed the Vicar. "How in the world . . ."

"Never mind how I know all this." Miss Perks nodded her head vigorously. "If need be, I will explain in my own time, but at present there is no occasion to do that. I must ask you to believe that I do not speak without the book. No, your objections are unfounded. There is a very simple explanation. Our friend Lovett took the dandelion wine, thinking he was taking poison; and Mrs. Waddell, who owes much of her success as a landlady, I understand, to never wasting anything, gave the glass of poison to the man Speakman, thinking she was offering dandelion wine. On the whole, I think nobody was to blame."

The Vicar was leaning back in his chair and stroking his chin and gazing with incredulous eyes at the ceiling. Mr. Winstanley told himself that this was one of the queerest dreams he had ever had, and surely it must be over soon.

Miss Perks rose.

"I am a very old woman," she said, speaking with great slowness and precision. "I am going back to Chesworth to-morrow. Anything may happen at any time. I have told you the true facts about the death of the man Speakman, because I thought it unsafe to commit them to writing, but necessary to confide them to persons who can be trusted. You are two highly respectable witnesses, and I hope you will know what to do if certain things happen."

Miss Perks stood for a few moments regarding her nephew and the Vicar with an ironical eye, as though she thought of adding that her hopes of intelligent action on their part were not too strongly founded, but they were the best witnesses she could think of. Then she walked slowly to the door. "I am going to bed," she said abruptly. "Good night."

Five minutes later the Vicar, whose last words had been an answering good night to Miss Perks, stirred in his chair, stretched his long legs, and stood up.

"Well, my dear Winstanley, I must be off. A very interesting evening. That port! Excellent stuff. Perhaps a trifle too potent. Yes, perhaps a trifle too potent."

Mr. Winstanley, whose head swam, agreed with him.

"To be reserved for special occasions, my dear Winstanley? The next visit of your excellent aunt, for instance. She is growing old, I am afraid." The Vicar shook his head. "Amazing the way she pitched into that port." Becoming excessively familiar, as Mr. Winstanley could not help thinking, the Vicar dug his host in the ribs. "Pitch into it she did. And capital stuff it is. You must let me sample it again, but with due precaution. Otherwise, I might be romancing, eh? I might be producing some highly coloured piece of Sherlock Holmes work for your delectation, eh? Really, my dear Winstanley, your excellent aunt . . ." The Vicar

glanced at the portrait of the military ancestor, and reflected. His face grew sad. "Well, good night, my dear friend. Good night."

He walked a little heavily from the room. Mr. Winstanley, who was by no means certain that his own gait carried conviction, followed him into the hall. They exchanged good nights again.

Mr. Winstanley opened the front door and both stood still, gratefully breathing the refreshing air of the good Downs.

"Well, good night, my dear Winstanley," repeated the Vicar once more. With sad, slow steps he began to walk down the drive.

On a sudden impulse Mr. Winstanley called after him. The Vicar turned back.

"What is it?"

"You have something on your mind, Vicar." Mr. Winstanley's voice was charged with pathos. "We have been friends for a good many years. Won't you ease your mind by confiding in one who has always been one of your staunchest friends and admirers?"

"My dear Winstanley," answered the Vicar sadly, and with equal solemnity, "it cannot be. I must not say a word. You shall know soon, only too soon. I trust, my dear Winstanley, that you will not share the sleepless night which must be my portion. Good night, my best of friends."

The Vicar turned carefully, and steered his way with caution down the drive.

Mr. Winstanley sat down on a chair in the hall and rested his head in his hands.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I don't know what to make of it. Indeed I don't."

He found himself shivering, and had an uneasy feeling that there was something wrong. It took him an appreciable time to discover that he had left the front door wide open. He shut and bolted it, and betook himself to bed.

## 3

That night, under cover of darkness, the village gravedigger, sworn like the Vicar to secrecy, undid his work of some days before. Behind a canvas screen rigged up in the churchyard, a saturnine individual carried out certain operations by the light of a hurricane lantern, working swiftly, yet with great care. He went away to a waiting car, carrying a small black bag in his hands; and the earth was shovelled back on to Councillor Speakman's grave.

The news was all over the village in a few hours' time, and formed the one topic of conversation at every breakfast table but two.

At Mr. Winstanley's there was little spoken on any subject. Miss Perks was no longer in the mood for conversation, and Mr. Winstanley had such a bad headache that he was not capable of it.



The car returning Miss Perks to Chesworth passed slowly through the village. Pennington had received strict injunctions not to exceed twenty miles an hour on any part of the run. On the outskirts of the village his crawl was brought almost to a halt. Men with striped poles had stretched a measuring chain across the road.

Miss Perks did not need to be told who they were or what they were doing. She lifted her eyes to the rounded hills which were soon to be blessedly endowed with a motor-racing track, and the remark of a character in a certain book, whose author's name she had forgotten, came into her head.

"This 'ere Progress," she said aloud. "It goes on. There ain't no stopping it."

Pennington, as he slowly increased his speed, glanced at her sideways. Poor old lady! She had come to his master's for a holiday, and nothing but shocking affairs had happened since she arrived. It wasn't any wonder that she had gone a bit dippy. All these horrors were enough to upset anybody, let alone an old lady like Miss Perks. Murders and suicides . . . and now this digging of the corpse up in the churchyard at midnight. That was a gruesome bit of work, if you like. Still, she wasn't likely to have heard of that: if people had any sense at all, they would have kept it from her.

## MISS PERKS TAKES PORT

So Pennington reflected as he dropped down the easy road into the Weald and left the Downs behind . . . but the old lady who sat beside him had heard of it, and she was wondering with the liveliest possible interest, just what was likely to come of it.

THE END

*See over page*

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